



This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

- + *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.
- + *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.
- + *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.
- + *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

About Google Book Search

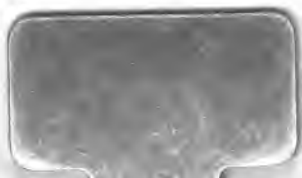
Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at <http://books.google.com/>

A
FAMILY
TREE





6000721800







A FAMILY TREE.

BY

ALBANY DE FONBLANQUE,

AUTHOR OF "THE TANGLED SKELIN," "OUT ADRIFT,"
ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.



LONDON:

RICHARD BENTLEY AND SON.

1876.

(All rights reserved.)

251. d. 233.





CONTENTS OF VOL. III.

BOOK II.

THE FRUITS OF IT—*continued.*

CHAPTER	PAGE
VII. FROM DIXIE'S LAND :	3
VIII. A FAIR REBEL	26
IX. "BEWARE THE HAND THAT HOLDS THE IRON KEY"	50
X. "WHAT DOES IT MEAN?"	74
XI. THE NEW MR. ALEXANDER	94
XII. "FRAILTY, THY NAME IS ——"	112
XIII. "HAPPY IS THE WOOING THAT IS NOT LONG A-DOING"	139
XIV. HE MAY COME BACK	161

CHAPTER	PAGE
XV. HARD AT WORK	178
XVI. THE TRUST, ACCORDING TO MR. ALEX- ANDER	202
XVII. A BAD DAY'S WORK FOR JACK . . .	223
XVIII. "LETTE DENYS TO DESMOND BE TRUE" .	245
XIX. THE TRUST, ACCORDING TO JOHN DENNIS	265
XX. VERY CONVINCING	288
XXI. THE FRUITS OF IT	308

A FAMILY TREE.

BOOK II.

THE FRUITS OF IT—*continued.*



CHAPTER VII.

FROM DIXIE'S LAND.



ERCY TREMAYNE spent Christmas with his mother, and told her all about Bessie, including the steps he had taken, by Dr. Raynor's advice, for obtaining a *pied à terre* from which to woo her.

The Malapropian rule that it is better to begin with a little aversion, seemed to strike Mrs. Tremayne as peculiarly applicable in this case, so far as she was concerned in it as a probable mother-in-law. Sir Stephen might not come to terms, or, if he did, Bessie might not. So she care-

fully welted all the various descriptions of blankets which fond parents have used on these occasions, and applied them to her son for the double purpose of damping his present ardour, and softening his future fall should Bessie prove unkind. He might hope for better things than land agencies; look higher than the daughter of a country doctor.

"I have heard of that aunt of hers—Mrs. Rose," said the warning voice; "and unless she is much slandered, it would be a blessing for the girl if all went as you hope, and you married her next month."

You have not forgotten that Percy's mother had been described to Miss Raynor as "a countess who takes in sewing, somewhere near Leicester Square;" so that if Mrs. Rose were the informant, it is to be inferred that there was no love lost between the ladies.

There was a time when a pale young widow struggled for bare existence for herself, and comfort for an old man and a

child, within sight of the once dilapidated patch which Baron Albert Grant has made beautiful for ever. The old man is long since dead; the child wants to marry Bessie Raynor; the pale widow has just spoken. Instead of wandering, wet and weary, dragging her pictures for sale to dealer after dealer, or sometimes even praying them for the love of God to *lend* her the price of a meal upon the work of a week, she takes her ease in her pretty river-side home, paints when she pleases, and there is a race and a scramble to bid for the result. She is surrounded by things of beauty and of freshness. Her senses revel in light, and colour, and space, in sweet perfumes and soft raiment; for she knows what squalor means. She, who was reared in every luxury, has felt the crushing misery of poverty, with its foul sights, and smells, and sounds; and now she has her revenge.

Years have passed since Fame smiled upon her, and with touch of magic wand

changed hard bargainers into eager buyers, want into plenty, and gave that quickening vigour to her genius which made her deserve the success she gained. But even now she will run out bare-headed in the morning, take a great gulp of the fresh air, or bury her face in dewy roses, with unuttered, though all-thrilled thankfulness, as though she had not even yet completely realised the change. She is grey and time-worn beyond her years ; but her southern blood warms her heart, and kindles her fancy even more now, in the Indian summer of her life, than when nourishing the early flowers of its spring.

“Mother dear,” said Percy, one night as they sat together over the fire, “I wish you would tell me something about our own affairs ?”

“I have been disgracefully idle. *Méa culpa* ! Idle because I was thinking of my coming boy, and idle because he came,” she answered gaily, passing a still white

and shapely hand through his hair. "I'll be good when you have gone."

"I was not asking about painting; I want to know more than I do about ourselves—our family."

"To see if we are good enough to mate with a country doctor's ——"

"Don't, mother, please. I know what we *are*."

"An artist and a land-agent. Will that not suffice?"

"If you wish it. But it's rather awkward not to be able to answer observations upon such a subject."

"Who has been making observations?" she asked, sharply.

"Well, Doctor Raynor did for one. I turned it off as well as I could; but I've been thinking of it since, and it worries me."

"What did he say?"

"He had one of his snorts about our being proud on your side. He snorts at things he don't like just as a horse does."

It's his way. He spoke of my grandfather having lost some property, or some interest, because he would not stoop to claim it."

"And this was whilst you were discussing ways and means about his daughter?"

"Something about pride brought it up."

"It was an impertinence," said the lady, drawing herself up, and looking as haughty as her own picture of Lady Percy, "which I hope you resented."

"I did not, for he meant no harm. I turned it off with one of his own sayings, 'It is no use crying over spilled milk,' but, mother, it is surely no impertinence in me to ask what every man has—yes, I will put it plainly—a *right* to know."

She looked him in the face with moistening eyes, then threw her arms round his neck and kissed him.

"How like your father! Oh, how like your father! His voice, his very manner, his calm, kind sternness when he was in earnest, and yet you were a babe when he died. It seems as though he were speaking

from your lips. Listen, and I will tell you all I know. We are of a noble Italian family, ancient, and once rich. We lived in Naples—governed, when I was a girl, by a creature nick-named *Bomba*, whose rule was based upon three instruments—the prison, the bribe, and the bayonet. Your grandfather lived before his time. He was a Rienzi, with no ambition but to do good—a Masaniello of the nobles. He had the winning force of a Garibaldi, and the wisdom of a Cavour; but the world was not ready for him. He lost all for his country, and when others had made it free, it forgot him.

“Your father, who commanded a small ship of war in the bay during some of our troubles, saved his life, and brought us to London. I know no more now than I knew then. We were ruined. He taught and translated his language while he could, and I painted pictures. It was the art of my country, and I loved it for that. I loved it more, as it gave me the means of

earning a pittance for those I loved ; but, oh, what a pittance it was ! Percy, I bought in one of my early pictures last month at a sale at Christie's—not even a fair specimen, by any means ; but I wanted it. It cost me two hundred guineas, and what do you think I had sold it for ? Ten shillings ! And was glad.”

“ Dear old famous mother ! ”

“ Your father was dead then, and the doctors ordered generous wine and good diet for mine. Famous ! He was famous, and he perished of want ; not want of the mere necessities of life—these, thank God ! I could provide—but for want of the pure air, the brain work, the room to stretch his mind and *act*, without which mere corporal existence was nil. If he had rights in his country, he never spoke of them. He never made a show of himself, like some other refugees. Once a large, blue, official letter, with *Palmerston* written on the top corner, came, and I had to answer it at his dictation, for he was too feeble to write. I

suppose it was some offer of assistance from the English government, for he replied, 'Your lordship's most kind and delicately proffered proposal is thankfully declined.' That was all. Perhaps it was to this that your friend, Dr. Raynor, alluded."

"No ; I think he meant something proposed for him from abroad."

"It matters not. Whatever he did was right, depend upon that. If it had been proper to go into particulars, he would have told your father, and he me. You have nothing but your own brains and your mother's savings, Percy."

"Something more, mother. When you married an Englishman, you took his name, and I am proud of it ; but that is no reason why I should not be equally proud of yours. What was it ?"

"Cravalli."

"I shall remember that. And now, mammie dear, we'll drop the subject. I have a hero and a martyr for my grandsire, a heroine for a mother, a gallant officer for

my father, and, if all go well, a thousand a year for my brains, so you may spend those savings on your precious self, and throw your sketches, paints, and brushes, into the Thames."

"My art belongs to my country; I will never give it up; it is the only heirloom I have—but one," she added, with a light smile.

"And what is that one?"

"Inquisitive! A toy—a *curio*, as you would say. You shall see it before you go. Now, one word more and I have done. Have you built on this idea which Doctor Raynor put into your head? Are you disappointed? Tell me frankly. In the glamour of your Bessie's eyes have you ever dreamed of being a bold baron, living 'in marble halls, with vassals and serfs by your side'?"

"I have not seen Miss Raynor since the doctor mentioned the subject," Percy replied, somewhat dryly.

"How like your father! Well, Mr.

Precise, let that part of my question pass, and answer the other. Have you built on this, or are you disappointed?"

"Not a bit," he laughed. He did not like to be teased about Bessie's eyes when his mother was in fun. Now that a tinge of anxiety softened her voice, it was quite a different thing. "How could I? Am I not a born Cockney? I suppose Bow Bells can be heard from Leicester Square, when the wind is favourable? One may like to know about one's grandfather, without hankering after marble halls. Besides, I have learned the wisdom of the proverb, 'Blessed are they who expect nothing, for they shall not be disappointed,'" he added, somewhat bitterly.

"Percy," said his mother, taking his hand, "you know my opinion about Warnstead, and so I will not repeat it. I believe in justice. If I did not, I should become a very wicked woman, suffering as I and mine have suffered. I am not thinking of the justice of courts of law, or of kings and

governments, but a higher mode of righting wrongs. I believe that all we have lost will be restored to us some day—but this is no reason why we should not work for ourselves whilst it is on the way.”

“ ‘Trust in Providence, my lads, but keep your powder dry,’ ” Percy quoted.

“ Exactly.”

“ If you were only the seventh daughter of a seventh daughter ! ” he said, kissing the hand that held his own. “ Take up your parable, and prophesy that I shall be happy.”

“ I will pray that you may be. Did I tell you,” she said, after some pause, and in a changed tone, “ that I expected visitors to-morrow ? ”

“ No ; but that is not news—you have plenty of visitors.”

“ These will stay here some days. To any one else I should say *garde à vous !* ”

“ Oh !—ladies ! ”

“ A lady and her brother. You will like him, and she—if you were a free man, I

should fear she might carry your heart, or you, back to America with her."

"They are Americans, then?" said Percy, as a man would say, "What bores they will be."

For untravelled Percy's ideas of our fair cousins on the other side of the Atlantic were based upon types with which Mesdames Florence and Barney Williams have enriched the drama. True, he did not expect that a lady whom his mother would invite on a visit would slap him on the back with a "*Hell-lo, young feller!*" or drum upon the table with the haft of her knife, and demand pumpkin pie. This his common sense held ever as a caricature, but he was not unprepared for one who would call him "Sir," would talk through her nose, and possibly misuse her knife at luncheon. When he saw a lady dressed with exquisite taste, and moving like a fawn; walking up to the door on the arm of a man who might have been a duke or a clerk in the Treasury, he thought it must

be some one else, but it was not. Mr. and Miss D'Esmonde were introduced, and neither of them talked through the nose.

They were taken over the grounds, shown the studio, and entertained at luncheon, which they discussed with good appetite, and the utmost propriety. Surprise, disarmed, Percy's next emotion was, to find that *he*—acting' host as he was—was being put at his ease! They came from a race, the most hospitable in the world, and took welcome as they were accustomed to give it—as a matter of course. No hesitation, no “oh, pray don't take the trouble,” and that sort of nonsense, about them. The word “trouble,” in relation to a guest, was never heard in their plantation home. The lady was, perhaps, too pale and fragile for our taste, and there was not one strictly beautiful feature in her face; but the faintest touch of interest or excitement, lit it up with a smile which would have dowered a dozen plainer maidens with beauty. A smile which

glorified it as the sun does the crest of a wave at sea. "She is either the most arrant flirt that ever angled for the heart of man," thought Percy, as she wished him "good-night," "or else the most charmingly natural girl I ever saw." Bessy Baynor, the good reader knows, was not quite natural, but he meant no treason to her. Girls can be charming without being natural.

Blessed be art for its own sake ; for its softening influences, for its inspiring action, for the slaps which it deals the almighty dollar in his vulgar gilded face. And especially let it be blessed for its loyalty to tobacco in the dark ages when *Nicotina* the queen—enemy of care, soother of pain, soft nurse of thought—was, by foolish men and women, banished. In the villa by the Thames, she had a worthy shrine—oak wainscoted, dim, luxurious, with low divans, a yard wide, of Bismarck brown morocco, skirting the walls, save where hung heavy curtains, emerald green, and

the winter fire blazed. Hither Percy and Mr. D'Esmonde adjourned when the ladies said good-night, and here they became acquainted. Woe, Nicotina! When your mutual friend says, "Mr. Brown, Mr. Smith; Mr. Smith, Mr. Brown;" you are introduced. When Nicotina in her crown of fire and cloudy robes of blue, graciously wills it so—you know one another.

"So you are a Southerner," observed Percy, as the talk turned upon America, "were you in the war?"

"I was too young," the other replied with a sigh. "I lost my father and elder brother in it. He was only fifteen—poor Tom!"

"What! did boys of that age go out?"

"You couldn't keep them in. We had no bounty jumpers or substitutes in Dixie. We fought it out for ourselves, and by ourselves. Why, if an able-bodied man had shown himself idle in the streets of New Orleans, the very children would have hissed him! Up north they could

buy brigades of Germans and Irish, and crushed us by sheer force of numbers."

"And now that it is all over—candidly, do you think you were right?"

"We went with our State."

"Aye, but was that justified?"

"Rather a large question, and one which has not yet been tried, except by fire and steel. They called us 'rebels,' the war a 'rebellion.' They imprisoned our President as a traitor; they deprived thousands of their civil rights as traitors—but, please, mark this! they never even attempted to convict one man of treason."

"It is well to build a golden bridge for a retiring foe," said Percy, who was strong in proverbial philosophy.

"A golden bridge! That of Al-Syrat was easy to travel in comparison with the one they made for us," said the other bitterly.

"With no Mahommed to give you a lift over it? Well, one great good came out of it."

“What is that?”

“The extinction of slavery.”

“It substituted one race for another—that’s all! The white man is the slave now. His former servant is his master. He does not exactly put him to labour, but he picks his pocket of the value of his toil, loads his property with taxes amounting to confiscation; and with corrupt judges and arbitrary governors, subjects him to a tyranny which you English have not known for centuries. And the negro is no better off than before, as a race. A few hundred possibly, good cooks and barbers, have become execrable officials, and the rest are starving.”

“Look here, Mr. D’Esmonde!” Percy asked, “which would you rather do—live free on a crust a day, or be a slave?”

“Put like an Englishman, but the *argumentum ad hominum* is not fair. The blood of I don’t know how many generations of freemen runs in my veins. The men my father held as slaves before the

war, and their great great grandfathers before them, never knew what freedom meant. They do not know what it means now. Ask me if *they* would rather live upon a crust free, or be as they were; and I will answer without hesitation that six out of ten—if they dared to speak the truth—would tell you ‘no’ to-day, and eight out of ten the same five years hence.”

“Then they don’t deserve freedom?”

“How could they possibly deserve it? They did nothing. I for one would not have denied them freedom as the result of a scheme in which they should work it out gradually, and learn to make good use of it when got. To understand the south you must get rid of those ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin’ ideas, in which your Exeter Hall folks rejoice. Suppose I were to write a story of conjugal life in England based upon the ‘Police Reports.’ Let me tell you two stories, out of thousands that could be told, to illustrate the real condition, past and present, of the negro in the south. An old

nigger once came to our house, in New Orleans, to ask for something to eat, and got it. Then he came twice a week, and at last every day for his meals, and got them. Next he asked leave to sleep in the tool-house, and got it. Next for a bed, and that was given. Dimes for tobacco and car rides followed—then came the end. We left, and his parting words to my sister were ‘Aye, missie! me is an unfortunate old nigger, t’aint like de old times. *I done got nobody as belongs to me.*’ Mark—not I don’t belong to anybody; but no one belongs to *me*. There were exceptions; of course; but that was the dominant feeling. The master, his children, his house, his wealth, belonged to his negroes. Amongst themselves they took their status from him. The free labourer they called ‘poor white trash.’ Now for my other parable. One day, just before the election of 1860, whilst in company with an ex-governor of the State, I met a ‘coloured gentleman’ dressed all in black,

with a diamond pin and a gold-headed cane, whom I recognized as my father's barber. He was charmed to meet us—quite affable, and asked my friend how he was going to vote. He told him he had no vote, being one of the prescribed. 'Well, what a pity—and I'm a senator!' said the darkie. 'Look at dat! Now I'll tell you what you got to do Mas'r Herbert. You got to get a bill of 'demnity, like de rest ob 'em. You draw him up, and I'll fix him froo the senate. Only don't you write him *too* good, else dey nebber will tink I done him myself.' These are our rulers now."

"Oh, but that must surely be an extreme case!" expostulated Percy.

"I assure you that it is not. We have legislators in Lousiana who cannot read or write. We had a chairman of a finance committee who was obliged to engage a clerk to add up the figures presented to him, and was not ashamed to ask for a vote to pay his assistant for the ser-

vice. As we were crushed by numbers in the war, so are we crushed by numbers at the polls; and when, by putting together all our force, we gain an election, we are swindled out of the fruits by some conjuring tricks with the ballot-boxes. All republics degenerate sooner or later into despotisms, and ours is going that way fast. But you've led me on to say more than I intended. 'It is a foul bird that soils its own nest.'"

"But a clean bird who owns that his nest is foul, and tries to clean it."


"Well turned! Like most proverbs, that one suggests its own retort. Yes; one of the best signs in my country is the repeal of the Elijah Pogram law—'we must be cracked up'—right or wrong. We are nearly a hundred years old now, and can afford to admit that we have outgrown some of our institutions, and that others are run by incompetent engineers. I love my America—great, free, wholesome, whole-hearted America of the people!—but the

fraud-United, force-United, greed-United
States of the politicians, I can only mourn
over. There I go again ! Isn't it getting
late ?”



CHAPTER VIII.

A FAIR REBEL.

“O you and my brother were talking politics last night in the smoking-room,” said Fanny D’Esmonde, on her way down to breakfast. “I hope he has made a good Southerner of you?”

“Would you have me a traitor?” he said.

“There is no room for treachery between a good Englishman and a good Southerner, Mr. Tremayne.”

She was standing four steps up the staircase, and he leaning over the broad oaken

balustrade. Their heads were not far apart, and he fairly winced under the flash which lit the small pale face as she spoke.

"I wish you could have known us before the war, and seen how thoroughly English we were," she added.

"What war?" he asked, with a twinkle of mischief in his eyes.

"I understand what you mean, and will follow you even so far back as that. Read our history—putting yourself in our place, and marking the provocation we had—remember how patient we were, how we strove for peace; and then judge what a wrench it must have been that tore us apart. And bear in mind that when war was forced upon us, the right hand, and all the brain that waged it, came from the dear old South."

"Well, it was some comfort to be beaten by a Washington," he said.

"We think alike so far; but when the separation came, it was with your king and his government, not with *you*. We loved

England—its ways, its thoughts—still. Do you know that there were old folks in Virginia and the Carolinas who chartered ships, and brought out English bricks, for the pleasure of saying that they lived in English homes?"

"I did not indeed," he replied. "On the contrary, I thought you were especially hostile to us because——"

"Well, because?"

"Please let me off! I was sliding into a subject which I should hate to discuss with you."

"I understand. You mean slavery. It is no use discussing that. I smile upon it through rose-coloured glasses from one side, and you dip your spectacles in lamp-black, and glare upon the other. No; let us go on about our English proclivities."

"I thought you were of French extraction; your name sounds French."

"Sound and fury signifying—nothing!" she replied. "We are American *au fond*—that is, down to 1776. We were British

for years and years before then. Oh! you've no reason to be ashamed of us. We are of no degenerate or mongrel race. We fought you well, and we beat you well, and we loved you well for all that."

She is leaning over the balustrade now, and Percy finds it pleasant to look at her and hear her voice, instead of leading the way to the breakfast-room, as he ought to do. She is pleasant to see; her lithe, plump little figure, draped in purple cloth, glorified with violet plush, a quaint stand-up lace collar crisping round her neck, and twin sisters of it on guard at her wrists. An elbow is on the balustrade, and her face is half hidden by the hand which supports it. Her voice is soft and low, with a contralto touch in it, which vibrates and seems to say "*hush!*" to every other sound. It is *alive*, this voice, and her bright face softens, and flashes up, and smiles in accompaniment. She is not ashamed of being in earnest. Her "we fought you well, we

beat you well, and we loved you well," are all spoken with emotion.

"This is acting," Percy says to himself, with what he would like to make a sneer—but it won't come.

He cannot keep his eyes off hers, and they meet him without a flinch of consciousness. When he speaks he finds that his own voice has softened.

"I am sorry to hear you speak in the past tense," he said. "Don't you love us now?"

"We think you might have helped us—that you ought to have helped us—in our struggle with the Yankees; and so we are sore—we *are*."

Down went her chin, sideways.

"Why, you were a child when the war was over?"

"And there are children in the South to-day, Mr. Tremayne, who think as I do."

"Does it not strike you as being rather the reverse of wise to" ("cry over spilt

milk " was on the tip of his tongue, but he checked the familiar aphorism, and substituted)—" to perpetuate hatred."

"It is not only unwise, but wicked. We are not to blame. Our enemy chooses to be ungenerous and brutal, and has to take the consequences."

"Come, come! You always hated the Yankees."

"We always hated Yankee ways—so much the better for us. Do you love Mr. Odger and Dr. Kenealy? Do the Irish love you? We are the Ireland of America. Generations of kind and honest rule would not quench our hate, and the first conciliatory touch has yet to be given."

"It is a bad sign for a nation when fair young lips can speak so bitterly," thought Percy. "Make the women thus, and what will the men be?"

"So," she added, more gaily, "own that you were selfish and wrong, and go into the corner."

"There's an excellent corner in the

library, with a fire in it," replied Percy ;
"will you come?"

"Oh, I have not been naughty!"

"Then I plead not guilty. I will not
be punished alone."

"Oh! a *tête-à-tête* with me would be
punishment! Thank you, Mr. Tremayne,"
with a low curtsy.

"I should have said that going into the
corner in such company would be no ex-
piation of my fault; but unfortunately I
didn't. When people fence with words, I
think they should do as well-bred fencers
with foils—acknowledge the thrust they
have not parried. So, mademoiselle, *touché*,"
with a low bow.

"Are you two practising for a minuet?"
asked Mrs. Tremayne, as she joined
them.

"No," said Fanny. "We were not part-
ners, but opponents. I smote your son
with a curtsy, and he crushed me with a
bow."

"Oh, if people will pelt pearls and dia-

monds, I, for one, must retire in disorder. I have no such ammunition," said he.

"We must really get up a convention *à la Russe* to settle what weapons may be used in these conflicts," observed Mrs. Tremayne. "As it is, young men and old women have no chance, and in the mean time suppose we go and breakfast."

It soon became abundantly clear that Fanny D'Esmonde was a spoiled child, and that it was capital fun to spoil her. She was a novelty, and a charming one. She never "gushed," and nothing bored her. She was as bright as a bee, and of a laziness which was as graceful as it was profound. When callers were introduced, Percy remarked the same cordial lighting up of her face, the same inviting openness which he had been conceited enough to think was all for him, when they first met.

"She has the dearest little ways," his mother remarked to him, as she ran up to dress for a drive, "and I never saw any one so quick at thawing people. Lady Huckle-

bury even was civil to her, and made me promise to take her over to Kingston on Friday."

"She is quite nice," Percy says as from the blush.

As a man in love, and half engaged to be married (he has his own consent, you know) he may play Sir Oracle on such a point. He likes to "draw" Fanny, and hear her talk treason. He gets some new ideas from her, and gathers her history, piecemeal, as follows :

She came of a race whose position is not easy to realise by the light of our own social history ; from a race of men who grew cotton and made sugar and were traders, but who ruled the vast estates which produced their riches as never did titled earl in our most despotic times ; and they brought into their homes all that was most refining in modern civilization. They ruled their lands not by the brute force of men at arms, but the influence which makes a happy household think that whatever its

head may do is right, simply because he does it. There was no higher rank into which they might struggle, therefore they were at their ease with all men. There were no lower orders seeking to invade them, therefore they were courteous and open to all. They had all the comfort, the calmness, and the grace of an assured past, present, and—as they supposed—future. Their Republicanism sat lightly upon them. In their hearts they were Monarchists to a man, as they saw Royalty—English-speaking and English-meaning Royalty—become year by year more pure, and their own institutions becoming year by year more corrupt. They were no worse Americans for that. Their sons and daughters married for love when they loved. There was room enough and to spare in their great houses for a troop of grandchildren, and there was a warm place in the old folks' hearts for the new son or daughter. The traditional mother-in-law was not known in Dixie, and there were children—not young

gentlemen who "didn't care" at thirteen, or young ladies who tossed their wilful heads at twelve, but free, happy children, who knew not a nursery gate, picked up the manners of the drawing-room, and were at their ease with all comers, at an age when our progeny are male and female cubs. There was not any danger for them, so they knew no fear. A maiden, however pretty, be her raiment ever so poor or so costly, might walk the streets of New Orleans—did she so desire—from dewy morn till eve, and not an offensive word or look would molest her. A short parley and a quick shot would have followed such an offence. Gay Lotharios carried their lives in their hands. When men quarrelled, there was mischief. No firing in the air; no scratch upon a sword arm, and then breakfast for four, amidst effusions of mutual glorification. Pistols at ten paces; shot guns, loaded with ounce ball, at forty yards; small swords, to be used as long as they could be grasped, were the order of the

day when a real injury was done. Barbarous! Oh, of course, dreadfully barbarous! We know better. A state of society in which a gentleman may give another the lie in a club smoking-room, or (being six feet high, and an athlete) may tell stories of his sister, or run away with his wife, and make fun of him (by counsel) in the Divorce Court afterwards, is so very pure, and *barbarous* cannot, in the oldest sense of the word, be applied to it. But it kept the crescent city peaceful and virtuous—as the cities of men may be—not because its citizens feared shot and steel, but for hatred of the cowardice and the cruelty for which steel and shot were prescribed.

In such a state of society was Fanny D'Esmonde “raised.” In her plantation home she was a princess sole—in the neighbouring city a princess amongst princesses. Not a whim unsatisfied; not a pleasure that her innocent young heart could imagine, denied. Spoiled! Oh, yes, all that, from her slipper tips to the topmost curl of her

chignon ; but taking it as a right, and giving back love and freshness and practical gratitude five hundred per cent.

Then came the war. New Orleans was taken. Her mother—who had sent a packet of quinine and some simple comforts to a sick son in the Confederacy—was imprisoned during the stifling heat of the summer, in one room, with one window high up, and when she begged for this to be opened, the renegade German brute who was her jailor, had it boarded over ! Husband and son were away—as all men were—fighting. Fanny—a child then—was left with her child brother alone in their house. At noon one day an order came from the general commanding that he wanted that house at four o'clock. He found it a palace, he left it a pig-sty ! He stole—there is no other word for it—he stole every ounce of plate they possessed, from a salt-spoon to a punch-bowl. He cut the paintings which hung on the walls from their frames, rolled up the “canvas,” and packed them up in his

trunks. What he did not filch, he broke or soiled. He left nothing behind but some grocers' bills—unpaid. What else he did in that city need not be recorded here. He had the cunning of a low Old Bailey attorney, the military capacity of a drummer boy, the coarseness of a butcher, and the heart of a mouse. In less than eight months he earned an amount of contempt for himself, and laid up a score of hatred against his party, which the honour of a Sidney, the prescience of a Cavour, and the tact of a Palmerston could not wipe out in a lifetime. He took himself, his spoons, and his pre-nomen, "The Beast," back to the place whence he came, and is now a shining light amongst those who turn up the whites of their eyes, and sigh over the wicked South, and especially over wicked, vindictive, and turbulent (though spoonless) Louisiana.

Mrs. D'Esmonde never recovered the effects of her imprisonment. The colonel, her husband, was killed in action. He

eldest boy died of his wounds. George and Fanny were left orphans, the one at twelve, the other at eight years of age, when peace, reconstruction, and ruin came upon the land. The ruin was not so complete for them as for many others, so far as the loss of worldly possessions went. They have houses and lands left which bring in a comfortable income, and they are now on their travels seeing the world.

Thus Fanny D'Esmonde—historian and sage, compiled from various fragments by Percy Tremayne and unrevised by this present writer, who admits that there is room for revision. The picture she presents accounts for her and her brother, and for some thousands of other men and women, who suffered as they did, and who are brought into immediate contact with the refinement they represent and reproduce; but it leaves a great deal out which may be added hereafter by another hand. A historian in seal skins with a bright little face flushed by the keen

winter breeze, and which wants constantly to be cleared of rebellious gold-brown hair, as you drive her along over the snow—is a dangerous sort of guide. A sage who moralizes in the twilight with a lace handkerchief at her eyes is apt to find disciples.

Not one thought disloyal to Bessie entered Percy's mind. Fanny was "quite nice," that was all, and Fanny's brother a capital companion. It was arranged that he should visit Percy at Warnstead, when the latter's holiday was over, and see the last of the pheasants; and then the project grew.

"If you would come, mother, we might all go,"—this with the slightest possible glance in the direction of Miss D'Esmonde. But Mrs. Tremayne absolutely refused. She would never enter that house unless he were master there. No, they might go, and Fanny should stay with her, till her brother came back.

"How very odd!" George D'Esmonde

had exclaimed when King's Morton was mentioned. "I have a letter of introduction to a man who lives near there, but which I never expected to present. We met his married daughter and her husband, at home, and they made us promise to call, if we ever went to that part of the country—name of Dennis, do you know him?"

"Yes. I—know him," said Percy, "but between ourselves there are reasons which prevent us from becoming neighbourly, as I should like to be. Still, *you* can call."

"Oh, I'm not impatient about it."

"You should call, really," Percy insisted. "The Grange is a curious old place; the sort of representative old place which Americans of your stamp delight in."

"And I'm not to go," broke in Fanny, in mock despair. "Cruel fate! There will be sliding doors, and secret places, and armour, and old banners, and—but oh, that would be *too* good—I might be able to give up the rest, but that, oh!—now

Mr. Tremayne the solemn truth " (small forefinger in the air) " is there a ghost ?"

" Not that I know of."

" Then I am resigned. There being no ghost at Mr. Dennis' Grange you can go there alone, George. Had there been, wild horses could not have torn me from your side. It is the ambition of every good American to see a real old British ghost. We have nothing but spirit-rapping things—inferior and spurious articles, with none of the proper surroundings."

" We must certainly find you a fine, high-dressed specimen," laughed Percy, " and serve him up with clanking chains; and a story, *more majorem*. When I was at Oxford I used to visit a house that was haunted by a previous Chatelaine, who very injudiciously murdered the butler. Oh, she *did*. There is no doubt about *that* part of the story—she beat his brains out in the cellar, and stained her hands, like Lady Macbeth, in the operation. She was very proud of her pretty hands, and in-

dignant with the butler for spoiling them with his plebeian blood. My dear mother ! I've seen her picture, so it must be true. She stands, life size, over the mantelpiece in the great dining-room, dressed as a shepherdess, with her beautiful hand in the air, so !—sniggering at it."

"Sniggering," observed Mrs. Tremayne, "is vile slang, but I must confess that it is good enough to describe the usual expression on family portraits of the past century. Proceed with your ghost, Percy."

"My ghost proceeds by herself every night—out of her own room, along the picture-gallery, down the servant's staircase to the cellar ; where she murders the butler over again, and comes back sniggering."

"Have you ever seen her ?" asked Fanny, fun and wonder struggling for mastery in her pretty eyes.

"Well, I can't say that I ever did, myself ; but I once set up all night watching for her."

"And she couldn't come out ! I know,

just like them. Ghosts are so tiresome."

"As bad as children and pet dogs," gravely suggested Mrs. Tremayne; "never will show off when you want them."

"Still," said Fanny, "you have plenty of old castles and places in England with ghost *stories*, and I'm not sure whether the story told on the spot with a circumstance—like that picture or some real sword that has killed some one—to help you to realise it is not better, on the whole, than sitting up for the ghost in the dark, and finding it is not his night after all. Have you a ghost story in your family?"

"I am afraid not."

"Or even a mystery?"

"Mother dear, can we oblige Miss D'Esmonde with a mystery?" Percy asked.

"Nothing more profound than that of a grown man who talks nonsense," his parent replied.

"Oh, Mrs. Tremayne!" Fanny expostulated, "don't you think it does grown

people good to talk nonsense sometimes? Please say it does, for there's George frowning at me."

"No one is allowed to frown here," smiled the hostess.

"I beg pardon, and won't offend again," George pleaded. "Now suppose we change the subject."

"Why so?" Percy asked.

"Because——"

"I know," whispered his sister. "We have what he thinks is a mystery in our family."

"A spirit-rapping thing?" Percy asked with malice.

"No sir. How dare you! It belongs to the time before that other war, when we were English, and is highly respectable."

"Stop a moment!" Percy exclaimed, jumping up. "Let me shut the shutters. It isn't quite orthodox to talk mysteries before dinner, but artificial gloom may be provided. Is there a picture or a real sword?"

"No, but something nearly as good. George, dear, have you got it?"

"Of course I have," he replied, breaking his promise, and frowning again; "but surely Fanny you——"

"Oh, yes, she is," cried Percy from the window. It was almost dark, though barely five o'clock. "She's going to tell us all about it."

"I—I think I'd better not," pleaded Fanny, whose gaiety had fallen considerably since her brother spoke. "It wouldn't interest you."

"Let us judge of that, dear," said her hostess.

"And after all, it was a dream, or—or—something; not a ghost."

"It *was* a ghost," Percy asseverated, "it was a real li—well it was a real dead man's—was it a man's?—ghost; and we will not be done out of him on false pretences."

"*Please* don't," she cried, as though he had struck her. "It was so foolish of me to mention it when we were joking, for

we," she said seriously and taking her brother's hand, "have been taught to believe there is something that we cannot comprehend, but must not jest about it."

"If you like to tell us, dear," said Mrs. Tremayne, who, for the first time, began to show interest in the conversation, "we will listen to you with the utmost respect, but if it be painful, pray don't mind Percy; we will turn him out of the room, and have our tea."

"The whole thing is not worth making a fuss about," George D'Esmonde interposed. "It comes to this. A remote ancestor of ours had a dream, or vision, or visitation—what you please. A beautiful woman appeared to him three times, and on the last occasion bade him follow her, which he did; till he came to a hut where a man lay dying. He had just strength enough to gasp, 'my son—at last!' and to press into his hand this curious old key."

So saying, George D'Esmonde drew forth his watch-chain—a double one—to one end

of which hung a silver key, the haft shaped like a cross entwined with ivy.

“ We have worn it, from father to son, ever since,” he added in conclusion, “and it is supposed to bring us luck.”



CHAPTER IX.

"BEWARE THE HAND THAT HOLDS THE
IRON KEY."



Fa mad bull were introduced into a second-hand book-store, and allowed to disport himself therein, fancy free, for (say) three-quarters of an hour, he might—should his dementia take a violent form—produce about as much confusion as Sir Stephen found when Judge Alexander bade him "come in." And if you wanted the portrait of a man capable of taking that bull by the horns and turning him out, the present occupier might serve the artist as a model.

Tall, bony, ragged-faced, with the eye of an ape, and the jaw of a mastiff, he presented a combination of force, fraud, and mockery which might have puzzled a Lavater to make a character out of. His visitor was no Lavater; standing there, in his lavender gloves, and a bunch of violets in his button-hole, he saw only a shabby old man, surrounded by evidences of learning which inspired no respect.

The judge swept a pile of books off a broken chair, and bade him "sit down there." Then he filled a huge briar-root pipe with the strongest perique tobacco, and fired it with a match, which he lit on the flank of his rusty black trousers, sat himself in his own seat by his own untidy table, and took stock of his visitor out of the corners of his furtive eyes.

His visitor, after a "hem!" or two, began pompously—

"I have called upon you, sir——"

"Granted; go on."

"In my letter of the eighteenth, I took the liberty of stating that——"

"I have your letter; it speaks for itself. You've come to suck my brains—suck away, young man!"

This disconcerted Sir Stephen. How dared this disreputable old man to snap him—Sir Stephen Willford, baronet—up like that? He would have resented the affront, but for something between a frown and a gibe on the disreputable person's face, which cowed him.

"Well, let me help you to put up the pump," said the other. "You are a Willford, and the head of the family. I'm a Willford, too—did you know that?—and I'm not proud of it."

"That is a matter of taste," replied the baronet, with his best sneer. "We are a good old family."

"Old, if you like."

"Many peers cannot show a pedigree so good and old as ours."

"So old; leave good out. You claim

from a namesake of yours, who lived in the days of James the First of England. Do you know what he was?"

"I do. *I* happen to have studied the subject, Judge Alexander. Our ancestor, Stephen Willford, was a man of note."

"He was a witch-finder!" snarled the judge.

"I beg your pardon!" the other retorted, hotly. "You know nothing about it. He was a trusted officer of the Bishop of Chester, and afterwards of the king himself."

"He was a witch-finder!" roared Alexander, "and a rogue at that! He scared people out of the country by accusations of witchcraft, and then stole their lands. Every one, by God! which your *good* old family have held, is stolen!"

"We have deeds of grant to show for it, anyhow," Sir Stephen muttered, much subdued by the late outburst.

"Deeds of grant be d——d! You stole them, gave up half to some rogue at court,

and got a deed of grant for the rest. A pickpocket who rubs out the number of a stolen watch, and has a fine presentation forged in the case, has as clear a title as old Stephen Willford had. Mind that, and don't talk to me about your good family. I know you. You're all alike. You've come here now to see if I'll help you to rob a better man than you are."

"You really put things in a most insulting manner, sir," said the baronet, warmly—"a manner to which I am not accustomed;" and he rose.

"Oh! you'll get accustomed to me in time—you've got to. It's my way. I don't mean any harm. Sit down, and we'll go on with the pump, and leave the family alone, now that you see I'm not frightened at your title and your pedigree. Now then. Your father found a deed of grant by King James to Stephen Willford of some property now held by a Mr. Denys."

"Dennis is his name."

"A corruption. It was spelt with one

"n" and a "y" when old Stephen died. Don't you interrupt me, young man, till the pump is up. Dennis, as you call him, would show no title when your father sued him, but relied upon *squatter's right*, which could only be upset by proving fraud in the original occupation, or some acknowledgment, by payment of rent or otherwise, of a superior landlord. Dennis's lawyers knocked yours into a cocked hat; but the old man didn't give in. He set to work to find that fraud or acknowledgment. He hated Dennis pretty badly it seems, and weighed him in his own scales. So the whole history of your good old family was raked up and turned over. He discovered that Stephen Willford's son came over to this country, and died here; and next he discovered me."

"It was arranged at one time that I should come out and confer with you on the subject," said Sir Stephen, taking advantage of the pause.

"Mighty lot of good *you'd* have done!" Alexander snarled.

"My father's letters remained unanswered. We did not know that they had reached you."

"They reached all right ; but look here, young man," said Alexander, shading his shaggy brows with a grimy hand, and looking his visitor for the first time straight in the face, "there was no business in them. They were full of poppy-cock. Do you know what poppy-cock is? It's fixed up of twaddle and beating about the bush, and 'if,' and 'perhaps so'—that's poppy-cock! There's pious poppy-cock, and that's meaner still. Old Sir William used a lot of that too. He wanted to suck my brains through the mail, and he never once wrote *how much*. That's why I didn't answer his prosy old letters. I was waiting for business. Now he's dead, and you are Sir Stephen. You know as much as he did, and more, now that you've got the history of your namesake. The rest is here,"

striking his forehead almost fiercely. "The pump is up, Sir Stephen Willford. The handle is yours. Go on."

"I will begin where my father left off," said the baronet, in a husky voice. "*How much?*"

"You're smarter than I took you for, by God!" shouted the judge, starting from his seat. "That's business. Half."

"Half what?"

"Half all I get you."

"You know, then—you—you have some clue—you can——" stammered Sir Stephen.

"Poppy-cock! poppy-cock!" Alexander cried, waving his long arms about his head, as though driving away some swarm of things that stung him. "I know what I know; I have what I have; I can do what I can do—and the half of all is yours if you have the sense to come to business, and drop your d——d chattering."

"Excuse me, I do not associate business with vulgarity and abuse. You said not

long ago that I wanted to rob Mr. Dennis."

"Pshaw! Don't let us quarrel about a word. Let it pass."

The speaker had thrown away his pipe, and was pacing up and down the room, kicking books, papers, and litter out of his way, till he had made himself a path.

"I have no desire," Sir Stephen continued, "to deprive Mr. Dennis of anything that is properly his, and it appears to me rather exorbitant to be charged fifty per cent. for the restitution of what is my own."

"You fool! Is not fifty per cent. fifty times better than nothing? Do you suppose that *I* would puddle and potter for a six and eightpence here, and a five guineas there, like the dolts who fooled your father into court before he had a leg to stand on? If I said, 'Give me ten thousand pounds down, and take your chance of what I may get,' would you trust me?"

Now the legal gladiators who fought for

Sir William in "the Rolls" were men of distinction in their profession, and absolutely refulgent with respectability as to their private lives. Mr. Lachrimer, the attorney, conducted a business which was over a century old, and had frequently been taken for a bishop. Dumbledor, Q.C., was a gentleman and a scholar. His junior, Mr. Burner, could do anything but take a joke, and was a rising man. Stephen remembered them all, remembered how they smiled upon him (all but Burner), and crushed him with their benevolence and wisdom. And now, here was a half-naked semi-savage raving up and down his dirty room, and not only treating him as the dirt under his feet, but forcing upon his hearer the conviction—if it were only momentary—that he was their superior! Excitement made him hideous, but irresistible. He looked like a wolf that was changing into a man, or a man who was subsiding into a wolf, as he raved on.

"No, you would not trust me," he re-

plied to his own question. "You're a Willford! Do you think you're to wake up the fighting devil who has slept here (again striking his forehead a blow which would have staggered most men) for twenty years, and get off with a lawyer's bill of costs? No, sir! Exorbitant! Fifty per cent. exorbitant, when your high and mighty English lawyers have failed? By God! if your father had come to terms, I'd have made him pay two-thirds for wiping out the old grudge. It's dead now, and I'm more moderate with you."

Dead? The old grudge dead? Not so. The error rather weakened the fascination which this strange being had begun to exercise over his hearer; but it touched a spring which raised the curtain from before a picture pleasant for Sir Stephen to imagine—John Dennis, who had expatriated him, turned out of his own home! Haughty Captain Jack, with his "d—d supercilious ways," driven to get his own living as a billiard-marker. There was revenge and

more—rehabilitation in the thought. His persecutor, as Mr. Dennis of the Grange, was a power in the country—as a ruined man, who would mind him? Half of what might be won from Dennis was no loss to Willford, and there *was* a grudge to settle. It pleased Sir Stephen's small mind that in the matter of that grudge he was going to get the better of the man whose influence was overwhelming him.

"I certainly think that payment of your services by a per-centage would be the most satisfactory plan," he said, "and I shall not grudge it, however easily it may be gained. I am a man of the world, my dear judge, though you, in your peculiar way, appear to doubt it. Everything is worth what it will fetch, and you have a right to sell your wares at your own price."

"Bah! I've nothing to sell. Do you think we are acting a play, and I'm going to open some box, and take out somebody's will, or a rusty dagger, or some such trash, and so give the rightful heir his own? Non-

sense! I've nothing to sell, only to *lend*. Take the use of my brains for half what they may earn us, or let us have an end of this for ever."

"I accept," said the baronet, holding out his hand. "Half-and-half—share and share alike, and I will sign any paper you like to draw up."

"Hum! You were educated for the Bar?"

"I was."

"Did you learn anything?"

"Well, I flatter myself I did."

"Did you learn that such a compact as we are making is illegal, and any instrument containing it mere waste paper?" the judge demanded, with lowering brows.

"What I meant was a memorandum for use between ourselves."

"Which neither could enforce?"

"Which neither could enforce, but it would be binding in honour."

"I intend to be stronger than that. I'm going to do my best for you, because I'm

also working for myself. I won't sell you. If you try to sell me, I'll kill you! Oh, I'd kill you as I would a wasp, so take notice."

No noise, no passion now, only a subdued hyena laugh running under the words.

The egotism, self-conceit, and self-confidence of this strangely constituted man, had their effect upon Sir Stephen, because (paradoxical as it may appear) there was nothing to support them. Sir Stephen was one of those shallow people who seek, and often gain, the reputation of being "very superior men," by sneering at men and things upon which society has set her hall mark. He would sneer at the theology of a bishop, the statesmanship of a prime minister, or the art of a Royal Academician, because he had discovered that one who goes into the world's temples, and abuses its idols, is much better thought of than he who stays to worship them. And it is so easy to sneer. Had this professor found Judge Alexander a smug, well-conditioned

person in a white tie, and gold-rimmed spectacles, occupying a well-furnished "office," with a bust of George Washington over the book-case, and had heard from such a guide, philosopher, and friend, one twentieth part of the pretensions put forward by this disreputable, unclean bully, he would have laughed them to scorn. Had such pretensions been less arrogant, he would not have admitted them. There was no middle course to take. It was a case of everything or nothing. The man was either mad or a genius. If mad, there was nothing to lose ; if a genius, everything to gain. When released from the pressure of the influence which had subdued him, the master of Warnstead could not explain to himself why he had been subdued. He only felt that he had been carried away by a superior force. How was it then that those lightly uttered words, "Oh, I'd kill you as I would a wasp!" thrilled him through and through, and made him shiver ?

"I'll have no papers, not a scrap of writing between us," Alexander went on.

"I exact the fullest confidence on your part, and I forbid you to meddle with anything I please to do, and I'll have no going back, mark that."

"It seems to me you are to have it all your own way," Sir Stephen observed, with what was intended to be a laugh.

The remark was put aside with a contemptuous gesture, and had no other reply.

"I will give you twenty-four hours for consideration. Use the time well. I will not have you pretend, even to yourself, that I snapped you up, that you were over persuaded, or any nonsense of that sort. Come here this time to-morrow, and say 'go on,' and you will be no more able to stop me than you could a hundred-pounder shot at the mouth of a gun you had fired; and always remember this—you came to me, not I to you. You have roused me out of the life of a caterpillar in a cabbage, and I'm

not to be roused for nothing. If you come here to-morrow and say 'go on,' I shall sell up all I have and go to Europe."

"To Europe!"

"Go where I please—that stops foolish interruption. I burn my ships—that's all you have to understand. The means I shall take with me will last for perhaps a year; so you must act sharply, quickly, as I bid you."

"It is only fair you should know that we have exhausted inquiries in England; that we have gone thoroughly to the bottom of our case on the spot," said Stephen.

"You have twaddled about with your hearts upon your sleeves," roared Alexander. "You have scratched the surface like a set of miserable barn-door fowls. Don't talk to me of your 'inquiries!' There's an untouched mine waiting for an eye like mine to discover, a hand like mine to work."

"You exact perfect confidence, and yet get angry when I tell you the facts."

"That for your facts ! I know what is passing in your thoughts, young man ; you are ashamed of me"—with a glance at his ragged vest—"you think I am not respectable enough to appear in your company. Wait. In two hours—but I make no promises," he broke off. "You shall see what you shall see, in my time, and at my pleasure. Now go."

Sir Stephen Willford, Baronet, was glad to go. He gave a gasp of relief as he reached the street. One sense had become accustomed to the atmosphere of smoke and garlic which prevailed within. It was not for fresh air that he gasped. A sense of moral oppression—mental servitude—was upon him, deepening, strengthening, in the presence of the man he had sought to use as a tool.

Twenty-four hours' reflection free from this influence did not affect its result ; but gave birth to many suspicious reasons for adopting it, and to pleasant falsities by which acquiescence was softened down.

He had stumbled against one of the genii, not fallen into the bondage of an Old Man of the Sea. His fortune was to be augmented as Aladdin's palace was built—out of his sight and without any trouble to himself.

If all went right, he could pay the genii his price, dismiss him, and take all the credit for his work. If the genii failed, so much the worse for him. The sting to his self-conceit caused by the genii's scorn of his assistance was soothed by this reflection. He almost persuaded himself that spite towards John Dennis was not the mainspring of his action. Was a man forbidden to seek his own from another because they had quarrelled? Who raised the question about the title to that land? His respected father! Who commenced the litigation? His respected father! Whose wish was it that he should educate himself to work the problem out? His respected father's! Sir Stephen Willford became a model for dutiful sons as he

thought of the extra thousands he might gain, and the score of hate he might wipe off, by following the steps of his respected father.

At the expiration of the twenty-four hours he called again on the recluse of Goodchildren Street, and, remembering the effect of a laconic "how much?" in a previous stage of their transactions, thought to repeat it by a jaunty "go on," when the door was opened.

Fiasco! The gaunt figure said not a word, but turned on its heel, walked slowly to its seat (upon which it fell heavily), and buried its face in its grimy hands. After a while he looked up and said—

"I have read that the half-drowned feel so much pain in coming back to life, that they would escape, if they could, from the hands which are resuscitating them."

"I never was half-drowned," Stephen replied, trying to be jocular.

"And I believe that the same feeling affects the half-hanged," growled Alexander.

But never fear, they don't *half* hang now."

"You are not in your usual good spirits to-day, sir."

"No. You have upset me with your 'go on.' Look here, young man. Suppose you had worked for the best part of your life in some room, and stored there tools which you had invented—machinery, the product of your brain, and which had become more and more perfect under your hand; and that the time came when you turned from it all in disgust, and locked the doors, and left the place and its contents to the rust, and the dust, and the rats? Do you follow me? And suppose that, years afterwards, chance, whim, force—anything you like—sent you back to the scene of your old labour, and to its implements so long disused. Would you not pause before that closed door? Would no sort of [fear come over you that in forcing it open the whole fabric might come crashing down in ruins upon your head? That

even if you did enter in safety, you would see nothing as you had left it? That you would find yourself in a tomb, where what were once living powers lay dead and rotting, with loathsome creatures crawling over them? No; you cannot follow me!" he cried, starting up, and waving his gaunt arms, as though to exorcise the vision. "How could you? Let us change the subject. Say, have you any tastes at all?"

"I hope so."

Sir Stephen flattered himself that he was a man of very fine and accurate tastes, and wondered what kind of taste this unsavoury hermit, who lived in such a den, could have to speak about.

"Ah! I see," the thought struck him, as he looked round, "he wants to sell his books."

Judge Alexander did not want to sell his books, but had something else to dispose of.

"I told you I should have to raise money, as I scorn to ask for a cent in advance," he

said. "Here" (opening an old armoire) "is what is left of what once was a fine collection of *bric-à-brac*. As it is, it would do credit to any cabinet; but such things are not cared for here. Some are valuable for their age and rarity; that cup, for example, is the old Chelsea ware, of a mark much valued by collectors; those bronzes are from Pompeii. If I had time and money enough to make people think that I did not want to sell this, or that, or those, I could get a thousand dollars for them piecemeal. Give me five hundred down for the lot, and they are yours; or, I'll tell you what," he added, as he brushed the dust off his hands—"lend me a hundred pounds on them, and take them to London, for sale there."

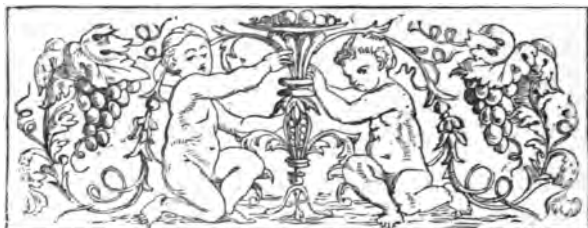
"I will have them at your own price," Sir Stephen replied. "We have a cabinet of *curios* at Warnstead."

"You've made a bargain," grunted Alexander. "That in your hand now is a perfect gem—a veritable Cellini, I believe.

Deserves to repose on a cushion of crimson velvet, under a crystal shade, to defend its intricate tracery from the dust. Look at this sea-weed around the anchor—so delicate, so natural !”


“I wonder where is the lock it was made for ?” mused the head of the house of Willford.

So you perceive that they were talking about a key.



CHAPTER X.

“WHAT DOES IT MEAN?”

“ET me see you in my room, Percy, before you go to bed,” said Mrs. Tremayne to her son, as he and George D’Esmonde were starting off towards the smoking-room, on the night of the day on which Fanny’s ghost story had been so cruelly cut short.

“Don’t you think we’d better not keep Mrs. Tremayne up,” observed George, when they were alone in the hall. “I am afraid she is not quite well.”

“What makes you think so?” asked Percy, with anxiety.

"Well, I thought she was unusually silent at dinner, and seemed rather restless all the evening."

"Oh, is that all! That's nothing. It's only a thought. Dear mother! She, too, mixes her colours with brains, and has 'torts,' as Handel had, which make her fidgety till she has got them safe down on canvas. Do you remember her picture of Portia and the Prince of Morocco? No; I forgot, you weren't here when it was exhibited. She did not choose the subject—not a good or a popular one, for the scene is not in the play as it's acted. A rich Manchester man—great fellow for modern pictures—ordered it on commission. Well, as a thing of colour and detail, it was just in the dear old Mater's style, but of course the success of it (or the failure) would be in Portia's face. She painted it full of fear, and that didn't please her. She made it anxious, and that wouldn't do. She hid it in her hands, and that pleased her at first, for the hands were beautiful, and there was

a quiver of indecision in one of the fingers which told you that, woman like, she wanted to peep at what she feared to see. She well might have left it so, but someone said it was a trick to hide incapacity, so she got angry, and painted it out. I remember the time well. It was when I came home for my first 'long,' and she used to be silent and fidget about as she did this evening—thinking. She never takes pencil in hand till she has the idea trapped in her head. We didn't live here then. We were poor folks before *Portia*—had a cottage in Kent, near Southborough, and the Mater used to go and sit in Southborough Wood to think, to wait for *Portia's* face to come. One day a little common-place girl passed along the path with a bird's nest, which it seemed she had found and taken all by her own self. She carried it like a treasure; but woe for her! In the offing appeared three big boys, three pirate craft bearing down upon this poor little sail, and intending (as she supposed) to rob her of her nest. The Mater

saw her hide it in the hedge, and sit down near the spot, pretending to make a daisy chain.

“The boys came up, and one of them jumped into the ditch, and thrust his hand just over where the child’s treasure was hidden, but after something else—something he did not catch, or did not want, which matters not. Mater watched the girl’s face, and saw in it—not fear or anxiety, but an expression as if she *flinched from a blow*. Portia was finished before sunset! The moment chosen was when the prince lays his hand upon the leaden casket, and is in the act of passing on; Portia flinches as if from a blow, is starting back, and yet there is a subtle touch of relief, which shows that the danger has passed. Oh, I do so wish you could see the picture. I cannot describe it; but you understand now what I mean by my mother ‘having a thought.’ You, or I, or your sister, may have taken some position or given some look which we shall find on the

line at the Royal Academy next May." They had reached the smoking-room by this time.

"And find ourselves the humble lump of quartz which has disclosed the existence of a gold mine," said D'Esmonde, lighting up.

"You certainly have a very neat way of putting things, George," was the pleased reply. They had become so intimate, that it was "Percy" and "George" now. "But please don't talk of your sister and lumps of quartz. Call it a diamond mine, and she the sample gem."

"My dear fellow, Americans cannot afford to talk about diamond mines just now," laughed George.

"Ah! you're thinking of that ant-hill made of rubies."

"Don't mention it. I tell you that when these frauds come up, I am ashamed of calling myself an American."

"Oh, they don't affect you."

"Yes, they do. You—I mean you English—always generalise, and generalise un-

fairly. Because you are made to smart every now and then by a few rascally Yankees, you think that all Americans are rogues. Because we speak the same language, and call things by the same names, you think that the meaning is the same. It isn't. J-u-d-g-e in England spells a man of learning, probity, and culture, who administers justice. It spells the like for us in a few instances ; but according to rule it means a party hack, who gains the bench by party tricks, and spreads his robes to cover party frauds. So you argue : ‘ Good Lord ! what a people ! Why, they cannot find an honest man to be a judge ! ’ ”

“ You admit that you *don't* find him. Does it not come to about the same thing in the end ? ”

“ Not for the present argument. Again, you hear that we have no social distinctions, that clerks, and what you call shop-boys, form our golden youth, and you smile a sickly smile when we speak of ‘ good society. ’ People are what you make them.

You—the dormant race here—have agreed that clerks and shop-boys are cads, and, accordingly, cads they are made. You despise them, and, by the inevitable law of Nature, they become more or less despicable. We—the dormant race over the water—agree to respect all men, and take them as we find them. When a shop-boy behaves like a gentleman, we treat him as such, respect him, and, by the inevitable law of Nature, he becomes respectable. If trade of itself is to make one a cad, the bigger the trade the greater the cad. There is no sense in your distinctions.”

“They don’t work badly,” said Percy.

“They are utterly delusive and mischievous when you apply them to us or any other foreign nation, as you are so fond of doing. The standard of our judges is no criterion of our national respect for justice, nor do the social qualities of your clerks and shop-boys form any guide for estimating the presentability of ours. Now do you see what I mean?”

“ Here’s to our better acquaintance in soda and b— ” said Percy, “ and now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ll run up and see what my mother wants.”

* * * * *

He found her sitting, dressed as she had left the drawing-room, by the side of her toilette-table, with a box in which she kept her trinkets open beside her, and so absorbed in thought, that he had to knock loudly several times before she moved and answered him.

“ Well, mammie, dear, what is it ? ” he asked, gaily ; “ D’Esmonde was afraid you were ill, but I knew better. I told him you were struggling with a *thought*. What is it ? Have I given you a new idea for Cincinnatus, or is pretty Fanny to be made beautiful for ever as Titania ? ”

“ Sit down,” she replied, not appearing to notice his raillery. “ Sit down there and listen, my son.”

She never called him “ my son ” unless

there was something serious on hand; so his manner changed in a moment, and he did as she bade him.

"When you were asking me the other day to tell you about our family affairs, I told you that I had one, and only one, heirloom."

"Which you promised to show me."

"And now I keep my word. Here it is." And she gave him a gold key, the haft of which was shaped like a heart entwined with forget-me-nots, and watched him as the blood rose to his face and brow.

"How very extraordinary!" he exclaimed. "What does it mean, mother? Why, this is the very brother of that which George D'Esmonde wears, and is an heirloom in *his* family!"

"Only that it is gold, and his is silver," replied his mother. "The main design of his is a cross—of ours a heart. Have you not seen branches of charms typifying *Faith*, *Hope*, and *Charity*? The Cross stands for Faith; the Heart for Charity.

I noticed Mr. D'Esmonde's key carefully. Do you remember that I left the room to get my glasses, and took it with me?"

"I do, now that you remind me."

"It was only an excuse. I wanted to compare it with mine. Percy, I have no doubt but that they were both made by the same hand, and that a master hand also, and that they are at least two hundred years old. That is all I can say. I cannot answer your question—*what does it mean?* I am lost in wonder."

"My dear mother, fifty sets of keys in the shape of hearts and crosses may have been made."

"But how comes it that in my family (which was Italian for centuries) there is a gold key fashioned like a Heart, which we have been bidden to keep as though it were a holy relic; and that in Mr. D'Esmonde's (of which he is the first member to leave America) there should be a silver key of precisely the same style of workmanship which has been handed down, as he tells

us, from father to son, and is supposed to bring them luck?"

"It is a remarkable coincidence," mused Percy.

"Coincidence!" exclaimed his mother; "it is more than that. I feel certain that there was—that there may be now, somewhere—a third key shaped like a cross in—well, most likely iron or steel, and that the three together unlock some mystery in which we are involved."

"I always thought that I was an enchanted prince," Percy began.

"I forbid you to speak again in that tone," she cried, with flashing eyes, and her hot Italian blood mantled neck, face, and bosom as she spoke. "This is no subject for jesting."

"Mother, dear," he replied, taking her trembling hand and kissing it; "you know I would not offend you for the world, but be just before you are angry. What do I know about this that should make it a serious subject to me? Your family has

one curious old key, and D'Esmonde's has another, that is all I know. After what you have said, of course I will never joke about it again, out of respect for you ; but really I think I am old enough, and, according to your own conviction, interested enough to be allowed to judge the whole subject according to its merits."

"You imagine I am keeping some secret from you?"

"If the subject be serious, you *must* be doing so, for as yet you have told me nothing to make it serious."

"Do you never have presentiments?" she asked, after a long pause.

"I am not superstitious, if that is what you mean," he replied, dryly.

"It is your cold English blood. Ah, no! it is your dear father's blood," she added, pressing his head against her bosom, and kissing his brow, "and *his* heart throbbed as warmly as heart could throb. Listen, dear: I am not keeping any secret from you. I will tell you all—everything

I know, and that is, know as you know things. When your poor grandfather was sinking for want of what his sickness required; when I was starving—not only hungry, *starving*—I took that key to a dealer in curiosities, and asked its value, It was the only thing we had left to sell. He named a sum which overjoyed me. I flew, rather than ran, back, and asked your grandfather's leave to sell it. I shall never forget the expression which came over him. For the first time in his life he gave me a harsh word. He made me swear I would never part with it except to you; and then to exact a similar oath, that you would never part with it except to your son. I ventured to ask him why. 'Because it is the key to your fortune and his,' he replied. 'It has brought none to you,' I said. 'No,' he said, very sadly, 'but the worst has come now, and the better time is at hand.' That was all he would say, and is all I *know*, but I feel as he felt—though without the knowledge he may have had—that the better time is at hand."

"Then the D'Esmondés will share in it?"

"Let them. Why not?"

"Will you tell them what you think?"

"Not yet. I will get Fanny to tell me that story in detail. Her brother only gave us the outline. Get him to talk more about it, and we will decide what is to be done before they leave. Ah, Percy, I do wish——"

"What, mother?"

"No matter. It is all in God's hands. Good night, my son."

* * * * *

"You will oblige me very much, dear," said George D'Esmonde to his sister the next morning, "if you would not mention that subject—you know what I mean—again. It is not one to joke about."

"Well, I won't—there!" Fanny replied, with frank confession and regret; "I was led—I ran over—I—my own thoughts ran away with me. There, don't look so grave. Of course I'll do as you wish; but, after all, there can be nothing in it."

"I am not so sure of that."

"You dear old goose! Do you suppose that you will some day meet an enchanter who will say, 'Ha! that key! you are the great-great-grandson of the Princess of Persia, who eloped with the King of the Golden Mountain in the year one, and are the rightful emperor of China.'"

"Not quite that," he replied, smiling; "but remember this, dear, our poor father was not a trifler. He respected that tradition, and greatly prized its token. His father did so before him, so why should not we?"

Fanny's eyes filled with tears as he spoke.

"I wish you had given me a good scolding," she said, "instead of speaking so kindly."

He drew her to him, and kissed her.

"We have only each other now, darling," he said, with a saddened smile. "We must not scold."

And so it ended.

You will understand after this, that when Mrs. Tremayne and her son returned to the charge, they took nothing by their motion, and became all the more curious.

"They are evidently on their guard," Mrs. Tremayne observed to her son the next evening; "and it is quite clear that there is more in it than that bald story of Mr. D'Esmonde contains."

"He gave us a mere skeleton."

"Not even that; there's no backbone in it. Why was that man seeking a lost son? Why should he give him that key? Why—having said nothing as to its value or interest—should the boy treasure it, and hand it down to his posterity?"

"Your last question is one we cannot answer about ours," mused Percy. "Perhaps he knows no more than we do."

"Percy, I detest subterfuge; and I am determined to find out what all this means. Suppose I were to show Mr. D'Esmonde my key, and frankly ask to exchange confidence?"

"My dear mother! What have you to give in exchange?"

"True," she observed, rather chap-fallen.

"You have nothing to tell him," Percy resumed. "If you get him to begin, how would you look when it came to your turn? If he ask you to commence, where are you?"

"Wisely put, my son. No; that will not do."

"But surely you could gain some information otherwise. Have you quite lost sight of all your Italian relations and friends?"

"Quite. Your poor grandfather was morbidly sensitive on that point. He repelled all attempts at intercourse, refused every offer of assistance. Everything or nothing, was his maxim. He kept me in absolute ignorance of our history."

"Still, famous as he was, there must be many now living who could clear this up."

"His public acts are well known; but these would give us no clue to what the key

means. The secret—if there be one—dates far beyond his time."

"Some member of his family might know it," Percy said. "Think, mother, was there no one who visited him in his exile, and had his confidence?"

"As to *confidence*, I cannot say ; he was so reserved," Mrs. Tremayne replied, half musing to herself. "But there was, as I now remember, one who was very kind to me, and whose visits he just tolerated. Strange, how things come back!"

"Let them come. Who was this one mother?"

"A secretary of what was then the Sardinian Legation."

"Good, so far. And his name?"

"Tasti—yes, the Count de Tasti."

"Well, suppose we find the Count de Tasti. I know a man in the Foreign Office who could unearth him. He may be an ambassador by this time."

"Or dead."

"I prefer his being an ambassador,"

Percy said, gaily. "Ambassadors don't die. My friend in the F. O. tells me that the junior members of the diplomatic service make this a special grievance."

"Percy, be serious."

"Certainly. May I write and ask."

"It would do no harm."

So Percy wrote, and obtained this reply :—

"MY DEAR TREMAYNE,

"Not to know Tasti proclaims yourself utterly unknown. Though disgusted (wise creature) with politics, he is Victor Emmanuel's right hand man, and knows more about Italy and the Italians than all the ministers since Cavour. Added to this, he is a right good fellow, and fond of everything British. You may certainly write to him, and I will guarantee a courteous answer.

"Yours sincerely,

"A. T. DOCKETTE."

"That's one step, mother mine," said

Percy, triumphantly. "*Viva il Conte de Tasti!* At him, mother, in your best *lingua Toscana!* Take heart. Several sheets of paper, and a new pen, and hey for the mystery of the keys! We'll have our *quid* for Master George's *quo*."



CHAPTER XI.

THE NEW MR. ALEXANDER.



MR STEPHEN WILLFORD was going down to breakfast on the morning after his purchase of those "curios," when a bell-boy, with a card in his hand, met and informed him that there was "a man hunting him downstairs." The card was "the man's" card, and on it was written JUDGE ALEXANDER.

A vision of grimy shirt-sleeves and ragged slippers flashed over the baronet's fastidious mind, and his first impulse was flight—anywhere, anywhere out of a world haunted by so disreputable a spectre. It did not

strike him that, being unknown to any one there, it did not matter who called upon him ; and that in a land of universal suffrage—which once put up for President a candidate whose love for Republican principles was in part evinced by his neglect of soap—dirty shirt-sleeves might be a recommendation rather than otherwise. Nor did he consider that ragged slippers and visiting-cards were incompatible. The bell-boy had called his visitor a “man”—not a “gentleman,” or even a “person,” but a *man*—and in so doing had followed one of the rules of his tribe, which is to discourage callers, by misnaming them, misdelivering their messages, and otherwise taking revenge upon them for the trouble they give.

But flight was impossible.

“Better have him up here,” thought Sir Stephen, “than face him in public below.”

So he directed accordingly, and up “the man ” was shown.

A tall, gaunt man, dressed in a morning suit of dark grey, well-blackened boots on his

feet, gloves on his hands, snowy linen at his throat and wrists—a man he might have greeted in St. James Street at five o'clock p.m. in May, and might have been taken for a cabinet minister! A man (mark this, if you please) who wore new clothes, *which did not look new*. Was this the recluse of Goodchildren Street? Where was his stubby beard, his long, dank, uncombed locks, his strident voice? All gone! But the eyes were there, with their dark, pent-house eyebrows, and the wolf looking out; there was no mistaking them.

Sir Stephen stood aghast, fairly astounded by the metamorphosis, and could not even stammer out a good morning.

The other took no notice of his astonishment, further than to say—

“You did not expect to see me so early, my dear Sir Stephen. I have taken the liberty of inviting myself to breakfast, so that I might be sure to catch you. You young men have so many engagements.”

In the breakfast-room the judge's domi-

neering ways came out, also in new clothes. In the mildest manner, and the blindest tones, he upset most of the arrangements of the hotel. He discharged the waiter attached to the table he chose, and appointed another in his stead, in spite of his indignant assertion that, "Shure, he was the man that belonged to it?" He took command, and gave his orders as though he was the *Amphitryon*, and the house was his own.

"You will bring in the dishes I have marked one by one," he directed the attendant of his choice. "You will not order the cook to prepare any one of them until you have placed its predecessor before me. Presume to surround me with half a score of little, greasy, half-cold dabs of this and that, and you will find that I am capable of throwing them through the window—*through*, observe—and I will not pay for the glass. Take this away, immediately. A rational human being does not inundate a fasting stomach with a pint of iced water.

Stay; if there be any scum on the hot milk, you can take it back; and you may present my compliments—Judge Alexander's compliments—to the proprietor, and say that I desire a cup—two cups, for my friend is also particular—which will weigh somewhat less than half a pound each. Do you quite understand?"

The waiter, who was a German, and found himself addressed, to his delight, in the tongue of his fatherland, and in the tone which its charming institutions authorise his superiors to use, did understand, and gave little cause for complaint throughout the breakfast.

"Now," said the judge, when he had tossed off a *demi-tasse* of Chartreuse, "we will proceed to business; and for that purpose adjourn to your room, where we shall be undisturbed."

He led the way upstairs, motioned his entertainer to a seat, and thus began—

"I have changed my plans, slightly. At

first I intended to go to England alone, but you will accompany me."

This was a surprise. Accompany him to England! Break the compact with John Dennis, and brave that old scandal! It might be done after he had beaten him at law, but before?—it might ruin every chance. He stammered something about "not convenient just at present," but the judge merely repeated his words, "You will accompany me," with such decision, that there was nothing for it but to make a clean breast, and tell him about the card case and its consequences.

"A mismanaged affair," he said, when the tale was told, "that furnishes me with a little further trouble to clear it up. No" (after a pause), "I think it can be turned to some use, now I consider. You will give me the names of the persons engaged, and assist me to find them as soon as we arrive. Now, as we are to work together, I am going to tell you all I know of our great case—our case against Mr. Dennis."

"Take care," Sir Stephen remarked, jauntily—he had relieved his mind, and was inclined to be pleasant—"Take care I don't 'go back upon you,' as you say here, when I know as much as you do."

"I am not afraid of that," was the grim reply.

"Quite right. I was only jesting, as you were when you talked of killing me, the other day."

"If you went back on me," said Alexander, still in his new voice, "I would shoot you on Fleet Street at noonday, if necessary. I would poison you at breakfast, and dine none the worse afterwards. If you fancy that I have been jesting, or that I shall hereafter jest, on this subject, you are fooled. Get that idea out of your head, young man."

"I suppose I must humour you," Sir Stephen replied, with a smile, but feeling uncomfortable under it. "When a gentleman gives his word, it is supposed he will keep it, and not considered good taste to

threaten what will happen if he don't, and you must excuse my saying, judge, that your manner is just a little dictatorial."

"Sir, my mind is dictatorial. It is the superior mind. Its light throws yours into shadow. That my manner should strike you as dictatorial was inevitable, and is not capable of alteration. Let this pass, and do not interrupt me again. When your father's lawyers advised him that the only way to meet the 'adverse possession' plea put in by John Dennis, was to prove fraud in the original occupation of the land, or some acknowledgment, by payment of rent, or otherwise, that it was held of a superior landlord, they treated him and his ancestors as common squatters, and never troubled themselves to seek evidence of fraud. The land was given, by Royal grant, to old Stephen Willford. His son, Charles, inherited it, and his grandson did not. Why not? During that son's lifetime one, Gregory Dennis, appears as its owner. How? Suppose we can show that this

Gregory Dennis defrauded Charles Willford, and that all the Dennises who followed have kept up the cheat, and so despoiled all the Willfords who followed, of their rights, what becomes of their Statute of Limitations then? Prescription does not run against fraud. Do you understand me?"

"Perfectly. But you only *suppose* such a fraud."

"Charles Willford was a fanatic. Not such a one as his father, but a sincere fanatic. Perhaps he was disgusted with the state of society in your England under its Stuarts, perhaps he was a little mad, perhaps—well, I am dealing with facts, and so we'll leave conjectures alone. He came to this country within a year of his father's death, and wandered about, preaching, from place to place. That old key I sold you belonged to him, and one of his fancies was to wear it hung round his neck. He never remained long in one place, but from time to time came back to Baltimore, where he found, and wrote letters. Some of the

letters written to him came into my possession years ago, on the death of my mother."

"Did I not understand you to say that you were descended from him!"

"You did. Fanatic and wanderer as he was, he found a woman to marry him, or his money—for he had plenty, and scattered it broadcast—and she bore him two children—one he took away with him in one of his wanderings, and lost; the other she carried to England after his death, or, rather, supposed death, for we never found out exactly when or where he died. The lost son was adopted by a French family of this city, and afterwards identified. I am descended from him. His elder brother became the first baronet in your family—Sir Austin Willford."

"What did the widow do when she got home—to England, I mean?" asked the present baronet.

"She claimed her dower out of the lands which now form part of the Warnstead estate, and other property, and established

her son's rights to what old Stephen had left, all but the Grange, Hallowfield, and King's Morton holdings."

"The very lands in dispute with John Dennis!" cried Sir Stephen, in a disappointed and injured tone.

"The very lands affected by the fraud," replied Alexander.

The baronet gave a sigh of relief. This was getting interesting.

"The letters written to Charles Willford were all from one person — Gregory Dennis (or *Deneys*, as the name was then spelled)—and for the most part contain comments upon what Willford had written. This Gregory was evidently an illiterate man, and did not trust himself to be fluent on paper. He addresses his correspondent as 'honoured sir,' writes of things he had done at King's Morton as his 'humble duty,' and makes use of many other phrases (which you shall read in the original, and judge for yourself) that make their relative positions clear. Charles was the master,

Gregory his servant. Now give me all your attention. One of these letters concludes with some very remarkable words, important enough in themselves, but which, if supported, as by further inquiry they may be, will place you in possession of the Grange, Hallowfield, and King's Morton properties. Is that plain?"

"It is indeed!" Sir Stephen answered, pale with delight and excitement, "but do you mean to say you have had this evidence in your possession for years?"

"For some twelve years."

"And did not tell my father!"—reproachfully.

"Pshaw! Your father! Have I not told you that he peddled and pumped, and hinted," replied the judge, "and never came to the point! Besides I had money then—had enough to eat and drink and be lazy. Why should I have troubled myself for him—for nothing? What did it matter to me who held the lands? If it had suited me to turn John Dennis out, I would have

gone and done it myself—*myself*, young man! The credit, the praise should have been *mine*. Am I a man to be pumped, and made a cat's-paw! To have my brains sucked by a prosy letter? He should have come to me as you have done, and perhaps he might have got what you will get."

"He very nearly sent me," said the baronet.

"I would not have treated with a subordinate," the judge replied haughtily.

"Well, you have the principal now, and he places himself unreservedly in your hands. Oh, Judge Alexander! how can I properly express my gratitude for your immense services, or my admiration of your talent?"

Sir Stephen was quite humble in his joy.

Alexander waved his hand, as though to deprecate this flattery, and smiled.

"I wonder if the letters from Charles to this Gregory are in existence," mused Stephen.

"I rather hope they are not," replied the judge.

"They might put a different complexion on our case?"

"They might, but what you call 'our case' is, thus far, only a part of the foundation upon which it will be built. Troops of facts, and suggestions leading to facts, which have escaped your mere plodders at home, will come out under my search."

"When will you show me that letter?"

"Not yet."

"But you will tell me its contents? you remember them, I suppose. What was the nature of the fraud? How did this Gregory get possession of the land?"

"That you shall know at the proper time."

"This is playing with me, Mr. Alexander."

"You can give up the game if it does not please you," said the judge with a cynical shrug; "only as long as we play partners—I lead."

"Of course you lead, but this groping in the dark is very irritating to me. It's

wretched play to keep your partner in the dark."

"Well, it will not be for long anyhow," the judge said, laying a hand patronisingly on his shoulders; "so don't be irritated."

"When will you show me those letters?"

"As soon as we are in London."

"Not before?"

"They are packed up."

"Indeed! are you—are we to start soon?"

"This evening at five o'clock."

"You take my breath away," laughed the baronet. "Well, I am ready. What a surprise it will be! Ah, this reminds me of something about which I want your opinion. That cousin of mine who was to have been my father's heir has been managing Warnstead since—since the fuss, you know—without a regular salary, wants me to make him my agent for five years."

"Then make him."

"But he wants a *thou*-sand a year!" Sir Stephen's pocket was a sensitive organ,

and he announced the assault upon it with a wince.

"Give it him," said the judge decisively, "and a handsome present to boot. Why man, don't you see that your policy is conciliation and liberality. I dare say this cousin has been making friends of the mammon of unrighteousness after the scriptural plan. Be friends with the popular man. Beat him at his own game; you can screw up the tenants again when your foot-hold is firm. A thousand a year! it is cheap as dirt. Respect for your poor father's intentions; liberality to a man who schemed (of course he schemed) to supplant you! amiable wish to heal up old sores!—there is an immense amount of capital to be made out of it. Is he married?"

"No, but he's going to be."

"Then take the bride-elect a pair of the handsomest bracelets you can buy at Tiffoney's, and make his pay date back to the old man's death."

"I couldn't do it," cried Sir Stephen aghast; "I haven't got the money."

"Promise it—that will do as well ; but let me buy the bracelets. There must be no stinginess there."

And indeed there was not. Eight hundred dollars went into Mr. Tiffoney's bank the day they arrived in New York, as one result of this conversation.

"There's one thing," chuckled the servant, "about this land agency, that we did not think of. When I get the Grange he'll have more than he bargained for to do."

"Meaning your cousin ?"

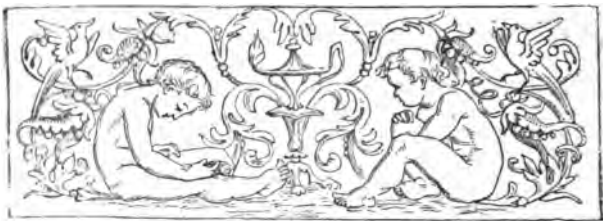
"Of course. I'll make him throw that in."

Alexander looked at him steadily for a moment, and then walked on.

"There is a proverb about counting chickens before they are hatched," he observed, when he had swallowed down his rising contempt.

"That reminds me. I was thinking about your supposed fraud, last night. Doesn't it rather go against us that Charles Willford's widow didn't find it out when she returned and claimed the rest of his property ?"

“Not at all. The lands were nearly valueless then. Besides she had quarrelled with her husband before she left — who could get on with a man who wandered about the country like a beggar, and wasted his means like a madman? She did not know what his possessions were. She found out some of them from honest friends of old Stephen. Gregory Dennis was not likely to lend a helping hand. The very fact that he did not damns *him*. So the fact you mention is a two-edged sword, and cuts both ways. Wait till you see the letter, and then you will understand.”



CHAPTER XII.

“FRAILITY, THY NAME IS” —.



HE time was now approaching when Percy might expect an answer to his ultimatum, which he supposed had reached his cousin at New York. But he did not begin to expect it; not, at any rate, with that feverish impatience which had marked his waiting for the baronet's first reply to his proposition. Then he was at Warnstead, and found it lonely work living by himself in the great dead house. He had little else to do than watch for the postman; and when that functionary had passed, there was no use

for the hours until the time came round when he might be looked for again, plodding slowly—disgracefully slowly, as it appeared to the expectant—along the winter-stricken road.

It was different now. He was at home, with plenty to occupy and cheer him, There was his mother, who spoiled him ; George D'Esmonde, who interested him ; and Fanny—yes, there was Fanny, who made the house very pleasant—Fanny, with her pretty impulsive ways, her delight in small things, her fresh and quaint remarks, her wondrous faculty of finding out what pleased, and doing it. I say still, that no disloyalty to Bessie Raynor entered his heart ; but a subtle, half-formed emotion—something between a hope and a wish—that Bessie would prove in time more like Miss D'Esmonde than he had hitherto found her, did give some feeble taps there. Fanny was so thoroughly a home bird. When visitors came down from London—as they did in flocks on a Saturday after-

noon—to the river-side villa, she was not seen to advantage.

Now Bessie, on the contrary, did not shine in her home circle. She seldom graced it with her fair presence till about three o'clock in the afternoon, unless somebody called. She had the reputation of being snappish with her brothers and sister, and not over respectful to her parents, since Mrs. Rose had taken her in hand ; and the servants hated her. This the fond lover set down to her superiority. They did not understand the grand, beautiful creature, who was all smiles and sweetness to him—or any other worshipper who knelt at her well-worn altar steps. To him she was perfection, until he had seen Fanny D'Esmonde.

Well, he had not much experience of young ladies. He entertained that lofty idea, common to gentlemen of his age, that he would be able to mould his Bessie into his own ideal—say into a sort of glorified Fanny—and neutralise all the evil teaching

of Mrs. Rose by the strength of his character and the depth of his affection. All his hopes turned upon the contents of that letter—that letter from Sir Stephen Willford which might, as the days passed, be awaiting him at Warnstead. But still he was in no hurry to return. Perhaps he wished to study Fanny's character thoroughly, in order to be better able to engraft its beauties upon Bessie.

Another reason for lingering was that Count de Tasti might be heard from within a week. The interest in the answer from New York paled in the glory of the news expected from Turin ; but the Count made no sign, and as business could no longer be postponed, Percy's holiday came to an end.

* * * * *

He was glad to find no letter from Sir Stephen in the pile of correspondence which had accumulated on his desk at Warnstead. The scene of his former impatience, and objects associated with its cause, partially revived it. He would have felt guilty if

that letter had got the start of him ; and his breathing quickened, and his hand quivered, as he searched for it.

“ You mustn’t mind, old man, if I leave you on your own hook to-morrow,” he said to George D’Esmonde, after their first bachelor dinner together. “ There’s such a lot of things to do. Sunday will give me breathing time, and I’ll drive you over to the Grange on Monday, and see about what shooting is left.”

“ I’m in no hurry about presenting my introduction to Mr. Dennis,” George replied. “ It looks so like sending in a bill.”

“ Mr. Dennis is not the sort of man to take it so.”

“ Well, then, I dare say he’ll find me out.”

Amongst the “ lot of things ” which Percy had to do, was to call on the Raynors. The doctor would be thinking badly of him if he did not go and report that he had, as yet, no reply from Sir Stephen. Besides, he would see Bessie.

Mrs. Raynor and Mary were in the draw-

ing-room, and it was past the time at which the lady of his love was usually visible ; but no Bessie appeared. Under all the circumstances, he did not like to ask for her ! and he observed, with some surprise, that her name was not mentioned. At other times, Mrs. Raynor had been fond of talking to him about Bessie. So he sat, and waited, and exchanged common-places, and watched the door, like an amorous terrier at a rat-hole.

At last Mrs. Raynor relieved his suspense.

"Percy," she said, laying a hand on his sleeve, "I know what is passing in your mind, for the doctor has told me what you said to him the other day. You are looking for Bessie. She's not here, Percy ; she's gone."

"Gone !"

"Yes ; back again to Mrs. Rose."

"Why, I thought she was to remain with you till May !" he exclaimed.

"It was so arranged ; but—you must know the truth, Percy. She had a tiff

with her sister, and was not quite as respectful as she ought to have been to me, when I spoke to her about it; for Mary was right. And then her father came in, and I suppose something had worried him—poor man, he has so much upon his mind—and he spoke sharply, and she lost her temper—quite forgot herself, I am sorry to say—and packed up her boxes, and left us. Oh, Percy! we have lost all control over her, and I don't think she loves any of us any more," sobbed the mother.

The sterner parent was more outspoken.

"I tell you what it is, my boy. The girl would make a capital duchess, or a wife for a Manchester warehouseman, with ten pounds a day for pin money. Give her a carriage to loll in, an opera box, and the family diamonds, and I dare say she'd have the temper of an angel. But she won't do for a poor man, or for a quiet life; so get her out of your head as quickly as you can."

All this was kindly meant, only it did not answer with Percy. His dear, high-

spirited Bessie ! his poor, ill-used pet ! Misunderstood at home, and driven to the side of a fast widow, who made her the talk of London ! He would show them how mistaken they had all been, if only that trifling cousin would answer his letters. He got terribly impatient about it now.

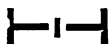
Perhaps he would have been less enthusiastic had the origin of the "tiff" with Mary been stated. If the Raynors had told him the whole truth, he would have learned that no sooner had his back been turned to spend Christmas with his mother, than Miss Bessie plunged into a violent flirtation with the new curate, an able-bodied young Irishman, who had more than his share of the pleasant faculty (bestowed by nature upon his countrymen) of falling in love upon the slightest provocation. In this case, the provocation was not slight. Even meek, retiring Mary was scandalised, and acted as an elder sister should, with the result already recorded.

George D'Esmonde was found out by the family at the Grange, as visitors are often found out in the country. They met at church, and the married daughter (Mrs. Bowring), whom he had known at New Orleans, and was staying on a visit with her father, pounced upon George when the sermon was over, and demanded, with graceful indignation, how he dared to be within a mile of the Grange without calling.

Satisfactory explanations having been made, and introductions performed, the parties joined and walked together to the Grange for luncheon—Percy with Mrs. Bowring, George with her unmarried sister, Grace Dennis, and Paterfamilias in skirmishing order, exchanging greeting with neighbours, front, flank and rear.

This John Dennis is forty-two years of age, but looks younger—a handsome man, with well-cut features and bright active eyes, the sort of man that most of us would rather (to use a slang phrase) dine with than fight.

“The Grange,” George D’Esmonde wrote his sister, soon after this visit, “is a charming old place. You will be delighted with it. Place two capital Ts foot to foot, thus :



and you have the shape of it. The foot of the Ts in front is the porch—in rear, a conservatory. The heads of the Ts in front are old—the rear is new. The lodge of the building was originally one long room, but is now divided by oaken screens into three.

We never saw such oak—as black as jet, as hard as steel, and carved with the quaintest devices. Some of it was taken from part of a wing which had to be pulled down, and, will you believe it? some Philistine Dennis of the dark ages had it *whitewashed*! But you are to see all this, and more, for yourself. Mrs. Bowring is here, and her children. I enclose a joint letter from her and Miss Dennis, insisting upon your coming here as soon as I am tired of ‘bachelor hall,’ as they call Percy’s domain. I am to go and bring you. Mrs. B., whom we

knew as the mildest of the mild, is here a tyrant of the first water, and from her ukase there is no appeal. You will like her sister Grace. Expect me in about a week. Percy is a capital fellow, and does everything to make things pleasant, but his cousin, Sir Stephen Willford, has inflicted upon him another guest, for whom I have acquired a most unchristian aversion, though he is a countryman—not a good specimen. I prefer the Grange, with you” (the last two words were interlined, with a caret). “Give my best regards to Mrs. Tremayne, &c., &c., &c.”

It was upon their return to Warnstead from luncheon at the Grange, that the other guest first appeared to Percy and George D’Esmonde. The fly from the station was just being led round the drive, as they passed the lodge gate, and they beheld in the distance the old butler and the odd boy struggling with an immense trunk at the servants’ entrance.

“A gentleman in the study,” gasped the

former, as Percy hurried up, a living mark of interrogation. "Says he's come to stay, but where am I to put him?"

"Mr. Tremayne, I presume," said the new comer when Percy entered. "Allow me to present my card and this letter."

On the card was printed—

"H. CLAY ALEXANDER,"

and in the letter was written—

"DEAR PERCY,

"This is to introduce my good friend, Mr. H. Clay Alexander, a most distinguished man, and distant relative of our family, in whose history he takes much interest. He is visiting Warnstead to seek some facts relating to our genealogy, so please hand him over the keys of the strong room, and let him have access to any old deeds and papers he may care to see. I need not add, give him a hearty welcome, because that you are sure to do, for the sake of

"Your sincere friend and cousin,

"STEPHEN WILLFORD."

No date.

"I do bid you heartily welcome, Mr. Alexander," Percy said, when he had read the above; "but really Sir Stephen should have been more considerate, for *your* sake, and given me notice of your visit. He knows perfectly well that his house has been shut up for years, save the few rooms I occupy, and so I am afraid you will have to rough it for a day or two."

"I have lived in a palace, sir," the judge began, "and slept under a tree, with my saddle for a pillow. Nothing is too good for me, or so bad as to be able to put me out of temper. Make no apologies; the fault is mine, I should have written. I intended to write, but I got through my business in London sooner than I expected, and to pass a Sunday in your capital, sir, is a dreadful infliction upon a stranger. Your Sunday trains are bad enough, but slowly as they drag along, they afford you one comfort—they are taking you away from a London Sunday."

Percy gave him up his own room, which in a short time was ready for his use, but did not suit his fancy. The position of the bed had to be altered, and its composition re-arranged. The dressing-table was too large, and he had no use for the chest of drawers. "Let me be brought something upon which I can write, instead," he commanded. A picture which hung facing his pillow as he had placed his couch, would annoy him in the early morning, so that had to go. He was not accustomed to sleep in a room without a carpet (Percy, like a sensible man, *was*), so a carpet had to be dragged out of some hidden store, and the bright clean oak boards covered with faded wool, plentifully engrained with dust. "It is quite as well," he mused, when he could find nothing more to be altered, "that these people should learn at once that I am to be obeyed."

The meeting with the Dennis family at church was not allowed to put off the proposed visit next day to see about shooting.

John Dennis was an autocrat in most things, but did not dare to doom a pheasant without previous consultation with his head keeper. They (Percy and George) were to come over early with their guns, and everything would be arranged for them. What was to be done now? Throw out a delicate hint that the distinguished genealogist might commence his labours as soon as he pleased, and leave the younger men to their own resources? Yes, that might do. The trap was baited, and set, but the quarry declined to enter.

“No; I think I shall accompany you,” said Alexander. “I have plenty of time before me. I never cared much for hunting small birds. My sporting days were passed upon the plains of the far West, with deer and buffaloes, or on the Rocky Mountains, with more dangerous game. I will accompany you, for the sake of seeing something of your country. Mr. Dennis, did you say? Not the gentleman who had some dispute with the late Sir William? Indeed! And you

are upon friendly terms? Ah! Very gratifying—very creditable, I am sure, to you both."

Up to this time not a word had been said about New Orleans.

"A down-easter, evidently," D'Esmonde observed to Percy when they talked the intruder over that night in the former's room.

"I wonder what Mr. Dennis will think of him?" mused Percy, somewhat ruefully.

* * * * *

Mr. Dennis thought him a "superior sort of man," principally because, for the nonce, he put off all his superior ways. At all times, even when most dictatorial and egotistic, there was a softness and dignity about him which gilded the pill. The ladies of the Grange, accustomed to what we call "good form," were delighted with his old-fashioned courtesy. He won the way to John Dennis's heart through his prize pigs. No boasting, no self-assertion now. Once or twice whilst going through

the home farm with his entertainer, he mildly "ventured to observe," and out came something which the practical squire recognized at once as sound criticism, or valuable advice. When George and Percy came back to luncheon from the park covers, they found the ruthless invader upon such a footing with all the family as to make any apology for his uninvited appearance unnecessary.

"I need not remind you, Mr. Dennis," he was observing as they came in, "that curiosity is a vice innate in us Americans. Now do pray excuse me if I ask all sorts of questions about this house, and promise that you will tell me, right out, the very moment I become tiresome? You will? Ah, many thanks! To begin, how old might it be?"

"The main building is nearly three hundred years old."

"Three hundred years old! And it has been in your family all that time?"

"Most of it."

"May I ask what is that inscription over the mantel-piece? My eyes are not as young as they were, and the character is singular. It is an inscription, I think."

"You are quite right. The slab of wood upon which it is cut was found in my grandfather's time buried under the ruins of an old stable. He had it cleaned and polished, and when I made some alterations, I had it let into the wainscoting where you now find it."

"I must put on my glasses," said the judge. "Now I can see. Ah! old English, and the quaint spelling one finds in the black letter. How very interesting!"

This was the text he read aloud:

*" 'Little Desmond for Denys go through
And Denys to Desmond be true
For Desmond or Denys will rue.' "*

"Quite like a prophecy of Thomas the Rhymer! I suppose the Desmonds and Denys of those days were sworn friends, and that their descendants fell to logger-

heads, as usually happens. Is there a Desmond family in this neighbourhood?"

"Not now," John Dennis replied, and as he spoke the luncheon bell pealed out.

"Don't you rather wish that you spelled your name *sans apostrophe*, and a final e?" he said, slapping George D'Esmonde playfully on the shoulder, "that you might share in the promise of that old legend?"

"I am quite content as it is," said George, "and I don't suppose I could find a chance of going 'through' for you, anyhow, in these prosaic days."

And then they went to luncheon.

"Well, how many poor pheasants have you massacred?" asked Grace Dennis, making way for George, who had been told off to a seat by her side.

"Don't ask," said her father. "Mr. D'Esmonde will take away a poor idea of our shooting if he don't stay till next October. Jackson told me they only got a score of shots between them, but they bagged eight brace."

"Bravo!" cried Grace. "How many cartridges was it that Major Taylor expended last year for nine birds?"

"Fifty-six. But Taylor is a muff."

Our sportsmen had little luck after luncheon, and drove back to Warnstead tired, and jolly; George, pleased that he had held his own with British pheasants, and Percy relieved of the fear that his other American guest would not get on with the Grangers.

"I thought you English county gentlemen liked to build yourselves fine houses," observed the judge to Percy after dinner. "How is it that Mr. Dennis, with all his wealth, is content with such a comparatively small place?"

"*Chaque oiseau trouve son nid beau*," said his host, "and the old Grange is the cradle of his race. Any snob can build a grand new house. Besides, he only spends the hunting season here."

"And the rest of the year in London, I suppose?"

"Yes; he has a house in Eaton Square."

"A new one?"

"Oh, people may have new houses in London."

"And how about business?"

"Business such as his takes care of itself."

"He is a most fortunate man."

"And deserves all he enjoys."

"A delightful neighbour. Pity he and Sir Stephen don't get on together."

"They are best apart," said Percy, dryly.

"I don't quite see that," the judge replied, half to himself. "I shall take an early opportunity of making peace between them."

"No one would be better pleased than I should be, if they could be friends," said Percy.

"That is right, sir, and does you all the more credit as it is opposed to your interests," replied Alexander.

"My interests! Oh, dear, no. I have no interest whatever in the matter. I see

what you mean, but you are quite mistaken. If Sir Stephen comes back a lot of disagreeable responsibility will be taken off my shoulders, and I should know clearly—but that is a private matter. I most sincerely hope he may come back, and the sooner the better," said Percy.

Why the sooner the better? Because the idea struck him that if the answer to his ultimatum were favourable, and Bessie got accustomed to be acting mistress of Warnstead, there might be some trouble in reconciling her to a humbler home.

He had been back nearly a week by this time, yet no reply to his ultimatum had arrived, and worry re-marked him for its own. The possible return of his cousin did not promise a speedy termination of his suspense. Mr. Dennis had first to be consulted, and his answer might be again—"Not yet." Perhaps his letter had miscarried. Alexander might know, so he resolved to ask—sideways.

"Did you make my cousin's acquaint-

ance in New York?" he carelessly inquired.

"No, sir, he made mine in New Orleans."

"In New Orleans! When was he there?"

"About a month ago."

"Indeed! Can you tell me if his letters were forwarded to him there?"

"I really cannot."

"Nor when he left New York?"

"No, not the exact day. Probably about five weeks ago."

"Pray excuse me these questions," said Percy drawing nearer. "I am rather anxious to hear from him. When he gave you that letter of introduction, did he mention having recently heard from me?"

"Why, of course!" exclaimed Alexander. "Dear me! how forgetful I have been. I owe you a thousand apologies for such very culpable neglect. About the land agency of course! He showed me your letter; saying in his light way, 'See what a hard-headed man of business I have;' to which

I replied, 'I congratulate you, for the writer is not one to be trifled with.'

"And yet he does trifle with me, Mr. Alexander."

"My fault — entirely my fault. He charged me with his reply, and in the press of business — but I see you are anxious. He said, 'Tell him it's all right; on two conditions.'"

Percy's brow clouded.

"I am sorry there were conditions," he said. "My terms did not admit any."

"The first," continued the judge, "is, that being his agent is not to make you less his cousin, and the second that the salary you name should date from the day of poor Sir William's death. They are not so very onerous — these conditions. Let me recommend you to accept them both."

"If you had only told me this at once," said happy Percy, after some further explanations, "what a load you would have taken off my heart!"

Why did not Alexander tell him at

once? Because his self-dictated instructions were these. "Find out if the man be popular or no. If no, gain popularity by turning him to the right about. If yes, be liberal, and make it that way."

"I've got to run up to London for a couple of days on very particular business," said Percy, at breakfast the next morning, "if you men can excuse me."

There was a guilty look upon his face, but a halo of triumph all round him. He might claim Bessie now! He stopped at Doctor Raynor's on his way to the station, and made known the happy news. A thousand a year, and three thousand to begin housekeeping with! Did ever wooer speed to woo over so smooth a road? Did ever a train go so slowly. Well, it gave him time to think over a thousand encouraging trifles; words, looks, sighs, eloquent silence under the moonlight, the drooping of opal eyes under his ardent gaze, admiration expressed and not resented, hopes suggested and not repelled.

Surely he had won her! The lightest hansom with the fastest horse that he could select, was as slow as the express—slower after its kind; but it landed him at last at the Tiburnian mansion of Mrs. Rose.

Was Mrs. Rose at home?—he asked the page, politeness demanded that he should inquire for the lady of the house.

Mrs. Rose was out. Indeed! Was Miss Raynor in? Yes, Miss Raynor was in the drawing-room. Buttons knew Percy, had oft been tipped by him, and made no objection when the ardent lover dispensed with the ceremony of being announced, and ran upstairs alone. But Buttons grinned.

Up ran Percy two steps at a time. Quick as he went, the conservatory he passed brought back a remembrance—a flower given, a hand held just a moment longer than was necessary, and yet no sign of maidenly revolt. Ah, that night! If he had had a thousand a year *then*!

He opened wide the drawing-room door. On a low *causecasse* in the dim religious

light which alone was permitted to enter that apartment, he saw the lady of his love, clad in rich robes, and by her side, with his arm round her waist, sat Sir Stephen Willford.



CHAPTER XIII.

“HAPPY IS THE WOOING THAT IS NOT
LONG A-DOING.”

IF the adage which heads this chapter be true, Sir Stephen must be congratulated. He came, he saw, and was conquered in double quick time. The drama was played out in a week, and the curtain had fallen on the last scene some quarter of an hour, when Percy made his untimely entrance behind the scenes. The future Lady Willford rushed upstairs to her aunt (who was only conventionally “not at home”) and prayed her for heaven’s sake go down, or there

would be murder. “Has he proposed?” asked the widow.

“Yes, yes; it’s all right,” replied her niece, “but Percy came in and saw us, and there’ll be an awful row.”

There was no row—there never is when there ought to be.

Sir Stephen had jumped up with a “who the devil——?” was chilled by the other’s haughty bow, and subsided. The *deus ex machina*, or rather the *dea* (who fluttered down imperfectly attired, with only one side of her face powdered, and no back hair on) found Percy hat in hand, drumming on the front window panes, looking very pale, and breathing much too quickly.

“Oh, Sir Stephen! Oh, Percy!” she stammered, “don’t you know each other? Or have you quarrelled? Oh, really——”

Then of course it came out who was who—to the mutual surprise of both—for, remember, they had never met before.

“Why, Percy!” cried the baronet, coming forward and offering his hand; but Percy

drew back and said : " Two questions if you please. Are you engaged to the lady who has just left the room ?"

" Yes, he is," replied Mrs. Rose—" there !"

" I would prefer his answering for himself, madam, if you have no objection."

" Why don't you answer for yourself, Sir Stephen ?" demanded the widow in an agony.

" Well, of course I am," was the petulant reply.

" Are you aware who was the subject of some part of a letter I wrote to you at New York ?"

" No ; and I'm not now."

Percy gave a sigh of relief.

" It is proper I should tell you, having gone thus far, that the lady mentioned in that letter was, and is, perfectly ignorant of the ho—of the possibility I mentioned."

" Well, my dear fellow, that's your affair, not mine," replied Sir Stephen. " I hope you will prosper as well as I have. Why don't you wish me joy ?"

"I wish you all the joy you can possibly expect."

"And I too," burst in the widow. "Ah, what a loss she will be to me! How *shall* I get on without my sweet girl? But I must not be selfish—I really must not. I give her to you, Sir Stephen. Pardon my emotion; this is too much for my poor nerves. I must run for some *sal volatile*."

And she ran. She had glanced at a mirror to see if she was doing the emotion business well, and caught a glimpse of her half-powdered face. That was why she ran. Sir Stephen gallantly attended her through the back room; and when he returned, found that his cousin had gone.

The atmosphere, full of a scent which he associated with Bessie, choked poor Percy. The stun of the blow he had received was on him still. He almost fled the house and the street, and had half crossed the park before he knew where he was or what he was going to do. Not return to Warnstead; that would lead to questioning. He

would spend the time with his mother, and go back to George, D'Esmonde and the rest, as though nothing had happened.

He told her his grief, and fairly broke down when she drew his drooped head upon her breast, and caressed his throbbing brows with her cool, soft hand, as in the dear old days when he was a boy, and her own.

Awfully bad form this, isn't it? Sneer at it, golden youth! scoff at it! I'm ready. "Fellow gets jilted, runs off to his mater, and blubs on her shoulder! 'Fernal trash! Haw! haw!" Make it e-haw! e-haw! gentlemen, and the criticism is perfect. You know as much about this sort of thing as a toad does of side-pockets. You don't understand how all that is stubborn and hard in the bravest and the best of us, may melt away under the magic touch of a mother's pitying caress, and do our manhood credit. So I think I'll let the "'fernal trash" stand.

Very little else was said between mother

and son about Bessie when the story of her falsehood was once told. She took him to her painting-room, and showed him her new picture, and, to divert his mind, brought up again the subject of the mysterious key. No; she had received no answer from Count Tasti. Perhaps he had left Turin. Was this the season for living at Turin? And so on.

* * * * *

Percy took Dr. Raynor's house on his way from the station, as promised, to tell the result of his journey; but the post anticipated him. It brought a very pretty letter from Bessie, and a very dutiful one from Sir Stephen, reporting the arrangement they had made between themselves, and requesting parental confirmation thereof.

"Never you mind, my boy," said the bluff doctor; "she's got what she wants, what you couldn't give her, and more than she deserves. She never cared a pin's head for you."

Sharp surgery this, but kind. You could

not expect a father to say of his child, "The girl is a heartless flirt, and you are well rid of her." But that was the verdict in his mind.

Miss Bessie knew no just cause or impediment why she should not be married off-hand, and taken to "my lady" it over King's Morton. She therefore wrote to her dearest friends (and choicest enemies), announcing her grand engagement; and this raised a good deal of talk about some previous "affairs," particularly that with the curate; and although Percy turned a deaf ear to it, like an honourable man, some of the shafts hit, and had a curative effect upon his other wound, upon the counter-irritant principle.

Of course the news reached John Dennis, and put up his back.

"So, sir," he said to Judge Alexander, "I understand that your friend Sir Stephen Willford is in London?"

"I believe so," was the careless reply.

The judge had written him an awful

letter, rating him up hill and down dale for his "cursed folly," that very morning.

"Ha!" growled the squire. "Well, I've not quite made up my mind about *London*; but he'd better not come here. If he does" (speaking more quickly, and with rising warmth), "I'll take care no one shall visit him."

"Really, Mr. Dennis! under the circumstances——" expostulated the judge.

"A man in his circumstances has no right to marry. I'm sorry for the girl."

"I suppose you allude to that foolish card affair?"

"To that *disgraceful* card affair, sir."

"Six years ago!"

"In this country, Mr. Alexander, cheating at cards is a thing which gentlemen never forget—not so much on account of the act itself, as of what it implies."

"I am glad this subject has turned up," said the judge, after a pause. "I should much like to discuss it with you, if you have no objection. Willford has told me

his version, and I have taken some trouble to verify it. I don't see where the cheating comes in, Mr. Dennis."

"He confessed it."

"Oh, no! Nothing of the sort. Badgered, driven into a corner, with his own father taking part against him, he was foolish enough to beg that it should be allowed to pass over. No more. Why, my dear sir, the poor boy had no show at all! You, who took his guilt for granted, and his father, who did the same, settled it between you."

"It was a perfectly clear case."

"Excuse me, if I differ with you," said the judge, with his new smile. "Allow me briefly to state the facts upon which you relied. May I? Ah! I see you don't object. Well, in the middle of a game of 'loo,' in which six players were engaged, young Willford rises to get something."

"A glass of water."

"For the present I prefer to say 'something.' You will see my motive presently."

He goes to a table where's a discarded pack, which had been thrown about the room—mark this!—were placed, uncounted, and just as they had been picked up off the floor. Now what passed at this moment is all important, and until I took the case in hand, has not been investigated. You all skipped it, and centred your attention on what you guessed to be its result. In short, you put the cart before the horse. You made your facts fit your theory, instead of your theory to fit your facts. Young Willford rises, I say, to get *something*. How do you know it was water? Because Mr. Plowden sneered at him for not drinking champagne, when he could get it. *Consequently Mr. Plowden was looking at him.* As the table was placed, only two of the five players who remained at it had their backs to it. Three of them *could* see him. How many of them did? There was no play going on, remember; they were waiting for Willford's return. Plowden saw him pour out the water; your son saw

him drink it, for he remarked in joke, 'What a good thing it is to be thirsty.' Mr. Tomlyn then said, 'Never mind, put it on the sideboard.' What did this mean? The table where the water stood was very small and crowded. Willford had some trouble to put the glass back in its place. His host *saw* this, hence his 'never mind.' '*It*' was the glass. Willford did as he was told, placed it on the sideboard, and thence returned to the game. He was seen to fill his glass; he was seen to drink its contents; he was seen to put it down on the other side of the room. Now I appeal to you, as a reasonable man, to say what opportunity had he, thus observed, to secrete a card? Above all, what opportunity had he to pick out an ace?"

"It was picked out—there's no getting over that," replied John Dennis.

"I think there is," said the judge. "Let us go to the main-spring of the matter. What was that?"

"To cheat."

"Granted, for the sake of argument. Mr. Willford had secreted an ace for the purpose of cheating. What was he to do with it?"

"What he did, of course," was the indignant reply.

"Which brought about instant discovery! My good sir, people who cheat at cards by sleight of hand, don't run such risks. An ace, unless it is trumps, is of little value at 'loo,' and particularly when the 'drawing' game is played."

"It was trumps, as it turned out," Dennis persisted.

"Yes. We will suppose that it was secreted at hap-hazard, and kept till it would be useful."

"A very likely supposition."

"Oh, I am taking everything against Willford, for the sake of argument," said his defender, frankly. "I am making my giants for the sole purpose of killing them, and effectually disposing of their dead bodies. He had the ace of diamonds up

his sleeve. The cards are dealt—eighteen, and the trump, nineteen. If three players stand, and draw two each, twenty-five are out—two less than half the pack—two points less than even chances that the other ace be out. Do sharpers act on such odds? No, *sir*."

"Anyhow, your friend had the reputation of always winning," said Dennis, who felt the ground giving way under him, but was not yet prepared to abandon his position.

"By careful and steady play," Alexander retorted, "he played to win—there is no doubt about that—and this brings us back to *motive*. Why cheat, if he could win in the long run? His was the only cool head at that table. All the others were excited by high spirits and champagne. It was nothing to him that Mr. Christopher Tomlyn had become a barrister, and he had taken none of his wine. But we are forgetting the other suspicious card—the one found under the table."

"Under Mr. Willford's foot, you mean."

"Exactly. Suppose it had been found under some one else's foot—your son's, for example—what then?"

"My son's character, sir," cried John Dennis, flushing crimson, "is above dispute. I scorn to reply to such a question applied to him. He does not play cards to win. There are no suspicious circumstances connected with *his* conduct, there or elsewhere, thank God!"

"I have not a word to say against Captain Dennis, and as I have already disposed of the so-called suspicious circumstances which were connected with Mr. Willford, I have a perfect right—as, upon reflection, I think you will admit—to value the fact of the finding of that card, by putting it as I did. But I was wrong to introduce a personal matter. Such things inevitably heat and divert discussion. Suppose the card (which I daresay had been kicked about under everybody's feet) had been

discovered whilst it was under Mr. Plowden's—what then?"

"You argue it very well, Mr. Alexander," said Dennis, wiping his brows. "You are a lawyer, and I'm no match for you; it sounds all right, but, d—n it, sir, amongst men of honour, there is a sort of instinct about these things, and—and—it's no use talking."

"Am I to understand you to use the word 'instinct' as applied to all—no, let me say, rather, as applied to natures which are denied the power of reason?" asked Alexander, his slow smile curdling into a sneer. "No," he added, quickly, seeing that a hot reply was brewing. "You merely admit being prejudiced. You have formed an opinion conscientiously, and you find it difficult to change it. As I said before, the boy was allowed no show at all. Had I been by his side, or even if his father had done him common justice, no scandal would have arisen, and no one would have

been blamed. But now the time has come, Mr. Dennis, when a scandal *will* arise, and some one *will* be blamed, if an injustice (unwittingly inflicted, I admit that) be not removed."

"Is that a threat?"

"A threat! Not in the ordinary acceptation of the word. I do not think that Sir Stephen has any intention of calling you out, or of bringing an action of slander against you; only if you were to do as you threatened just now, and revive this old scandal, after such a complete refutation as I have given it, and just as the young man is about to make a happy marriage, I think that men of honour, with all their supposed instincts against the value of facts, would blame you, I do, indeed, Mr. Dennis—especially when they remember——"

"Well, sir, go on."

"Perhaps I had better not. I was on the point of tripping once again over a personal matter. I have said quite enough. Think it over, Mr. Dennis. Sleep upon it."

"Sir Stephen Willford has broken his promise, by coming to London," said John Dennis. "A man who breaks his word does not stand well in asking for commiseration."

"Oh, dear me! you quite mistake Sir Stephen's position," Alexander replied. "Broken his promise! there was never any promise to break. His father forced him into a compact under threat of starvation: no one is bound to a thing like that. He does not ask you to let him come back here—he's coming, anyhow."

"Confound his impudence!"

"It's not impudence—say innocence, for I don't think he has the slightest idea that you treat that so-called 'promise' as serious."

"Then why has he sent you here as his advocate? Answer me that, Mr. Alexander."

"I am not here as his advocate—on this subject, at least. Perhaps I have been wrong in volunteering his defence. You

were going to play into his hands, and I have stopped you."

"How so? I don't see that," said Dennis, quickly.

"Why, of course. If you persist in your version of the affair, he will be compelled to fight it out; and by acting as you proposed at the commencement of this conversation, you would give him the best possible means of setting himself right at your expense. And bear in mind that the burden of the proof would rest on you. They don't admit *instincts* into the Courts of Assize, Mr. Dennis. They prefer facts."

"You speak as though I alone knew of this scandal. If he were to come here, there are fifty people who would be reminded of it, and set five hundred talking about it in a fortnight."

"That may be; but what they would say would be guided altogether by what you might do," said the judge.

"What would you have me do? Go up to London for this man, and bring him

home in triumph with a band of music?" asked Dennis, scoffing.

"I thought we were speaking seriously. If you really expect an answer to your first question, I should say 'do nothing.' You and the Willfords never were friends. Leave him alone, and he will—no, I must not make any promises."

"What Sir Stephen may please to do is a matter of the profoundest indifference to me," said Dennis, haughtily. "And as to promises—well, I will think over what you have said."

"A very wise conclusion, sir."

"I'm sure I ought to be exceedingly grateful to you for the interest you take in my affairs," said the squire, a little nettled at the other's tone.

"*A façon de parler*," Alexander replied, with a depreciating wave of his bony hand; "but I am not without hope, Mr. Dennis, that the time may come when you will know me better, and repeat that phrase with all sincerity."

"This is the third sort of half hint you have thrown out that there is something in your mind about me or my affairs beyond this miserable card case. I am a plain man, and like to meet things straight in the face," said John Dennis.

"You will find me much of the same kidney when the proper occasion comes," replied Alexander, looking him straight into the eyes.

"Then there is something behind?"

"Excuse me, I did not say so. There may be, or there may not. I said that *when* the proper occasion arrives you will find me as plain-spoken and straightforward as yourself. Good-day, sir. Think over what I have said—not as Sir Stephen's law adviser, not even as his friend acting with his authority. I did not start the subject; but simply as a man of some common sense, and perhaps a little selfishness, who has had experience of these sort of feuds, knows that they are utterly unprofitable, and wishes for peace and quiet in a place

where he expects to pass a good deal of his time."

And so the first shot was fired.

John Dennis went home sure that Alexander's arguments were convincing, and hating to be convinced.

"Hang the fellow!" he growled to himself, making the gravel fly with a great whirl of his stick. "I'll give him another chance. Jack's all right. Jack wanted him to know it long ago. I'll do it for Jack."

So we see that Judge Alexander had not been idle during his short stay in London. He found out Mr. Steadman, and with his assistance unearthed Plowden, the barrister, whose convivial habits had, I am sorry to say, brought him to grief, and that pitiable condition which follows this sort of grief when treated with stimulants, utter loss of self-respect. He was ready to remember and swear to anything for a five-pound note, and would have made a much stronger case for Sir Stephen than that eventually

relied upon if his examiner had been less covetous, still, it put him on the right track. It was fortunate that Mr. Berresford, the cynic, who perhaps knew more about it than all the rest, had gone out to India to practise his profession there.



CHAPTER XIV.

HE MAY COME BACK.


HAVING thus far set matters right (for he saw by his manner how Mr. Dennis would decide), Judge Alexander went to London to rate Sir Stephen some more, report progress, discuss future proceedings, and impress upon him that he must on no account think of getting married until all had been made smooth at Warnstead.

“But why on earth *should* you tell him that I am going to claim the Grange? That’ll sure to make him hold out,” expostulated the baronet.

“On the contrary, it will help to make him give in. Strange as it may appear to you, Sir Stephen, we are dealing with an honourable man. Leave him to me.”

Bessie, quick to put this and that together, saw in the judge the cause of the postponement of her hopes, and hated him bitterly, but was outwardly all smiles. It did not surprise him to see on her fair wrists the identical bracelets which he had made her lover purchase for Mr. Tremayne's betrothed. After all, they had reached the lady for whom they were intended (as the gossip of King's Morton informed him), though by a different route to that originally contemplated. He kept his counsel, however, as there was nothing to be gained by telling the truth, and it might be useful hereafter.

He returned to Warnstead, and set to work upon his genealogy, keeping carefully out of Mr. Dennis's way. It was no part of his scheme to let that gentleman imagine he was anxious about his decision. Dennis



was burning to deliver it, for Jack's sake, and because he respected Doctor Raynor, and had a fatherly liking for his splendid daughter, with all her faults.

So as the mountain would not go to Mahomet, Mahomet went to the mountain, and after some beating about the bush, broke the ice.

"I've been thinking over what you said the other day about Sir Stephen Willford and that card affair, Mr. Alexander," he began. "My son is the most interested party ; I only acted for him ; and as he is satisfied, why——"

"Permit me, one moment," interrupted the judge. "I also have been thinking it over, and it strikes me now, that my promise to be perfectly straightforward and outspoken with you requires me to add something. To my mind, it furnishes one other reason why you should act as I fancy you are going to do ; but you may think differently. I have communicated with my

friend, and have his permission to broach the subject."

"I am ready to hear it," said Dennis.

"You may possibly remember that during our last conversation I said, 'Leave him alone, and he'—I was going to add—will leave you alone. This would not have been strictly correct."

"Indeed! Then let him fight it out his own way!" said Dennis, firing up.

"You mistake. This has no reference to the card case, but to something of much greater importance. Sir Stephen is advised that he has a claim to a portion of the estates you hold."

"Oh! that old folly. I thought I had made his father smart enough on that. Advised he has a claim to my land? By you, I suppose?"

"Exactly."

"So I am to let him come back, and bolster up his blackened character, so that he may harass me with futile law, or screw

money out of me to buy him off? That's the case, is it?"

"No; nor anything like it," was the calm reply.

"And this," Dennis went on, getting more and more angry, "is an additional reason why I should be considerate, as I intended to be, is it? A mighty strange reason. I don't see your usual logic in this, Mr. Alexander."

"Let me assist you," replied the imperturbable judge. "If all the world knew and respected our motives, what a happy life we should lead; but they don't. People are apt to make motives. If you persisted in keeping Sir Stephen out of England under pain of an exposure, he having, as he thinks, a claim against your land, there would certainly be those who would put this and that together, and think that you did so because you were afraid of him."

"I afraid of that creature! This is insulting, sir."

"It is not meant so, I assure you. No

such idea strikes *me*. I only suggest that it might arise. If I had not mentioned it, you would have had a right hereafter to turn round upon me and say, 'Is this your straightforward dealing? You persuaded me to hush up that card scandal, to let your friend come home in peace, and you concealed from me that his main object in returning is to make an attack upon my interests!' You shall not be able to say this of me, Mr. Dennis."

"I ask your pardon. I was vexed and hasty. Shake hands. There, it's over. I understand you now, and respect you," said John Dennis. "I wish to goodness you were not mixed up with that Willford. I like you Americans. You are true and hearty. Some of you were very good to one of my girls. Can't we let Willford 'slide,' as you say, and be friends?"

"We can be friends, I hope, without letting Willford slide," the judge replied, with his new smile. "I expect to be very useful to you both, if you will let me."

“What on earth is he after?” Dennis asked, snappishly. “I beat his father; why don’t he see that I can beat him over the same course?”

“It is not quite the same course.”

“Well, let him communicate with my attorneys.”

“Mr. Dennis, this is not a case for attorneys—at least, I hope not. It is one in which those *instincts* you spoke of the other day should rule.”

“If I remember right, you ridiculed them.”

“As relied upon against facts—yes. As applied to ascertained facts, I know of no better judgment than that which the instinct of honour affords. If I satisfied you that you were withholding from any one—friend or foe—what was justly his, would you refer me to your solicitors, and drive me to twelve dunderheads in a box to tell you what you, as a man of honour, should do?”

“Perhaps not. But how are you to

satisfy me? That's the question. Facts require to be sifted, law to be ascertained. 'Twelve dunderheads in a box' (they need not be dunderheads, you know) are part of the machinery which society has invented for this purpose. It is only on the stage that the rightful heir comes out and says, 'I've got a strawberry mark on my arm, therefore give me up this castle, and marry me to the Lady Sophronisba.' The case you put is all very fine in theory, but in practice it won't do."

"It has made you merry, which is something, whilst upon a disagreeable subject," Alexander observed.

"'Let those laugh who win,' says the proverb. I've won, so I may laugh."

"'He who laughs last, laughs longest,' caps you, I think," said the judge, dryly. "But laughing, in this sense, implies triumph. We want no triumph, no publicity, no heart-burning; no men in a box, or judge on a bench. As for satisfying

you, that is to be my business; *and I mean to do it !*"

"Do you propose to begin now?"

"No. I'm not ready yet. I flatter myself that I know more about the English law of trusts than any American lawyer; but yet have something to learn. Your courts of equity are very stringent about trusts, Mr. Dennis."

"And justly. So you fancy I hold my land on a trust?"

"I did not say so."

"But you hinted as much."

"I never hint, sir."

"Then why speak of trusts in relation to my property?"

"Excuse me—the subject was Sir Stephen Willford's case."

"Oh ! *he* has a trust, has he?"

"That question he will answer in due time."

"In-deed ! Well, if there be a trust, there must be some deed creating it. Trusts are created by deed."

"Some are."

"And if there be a trust, there must be some one to benefit by it. What do you lawyers call the person for whom a trust is created?"

"The *cestui que trust*."

"Yes—that's the name. Now what, in the name of heaven! can Sir Stephen Willford have to do with any trust which can affect me? It's ridiculous! When you have anything serious to urge, give me a call, and I will convince *you* that you have hold of a mare's nest. I like you, Mr. Alexander, and don't want you to be made a dupe of. As for Willford, let him come back and do his worst. I have only contempt for him. Let him take care, though, or he may find himself where another claimant is, picking oakum."

"I shall certainly call upon you when I am ready," was the judge's grim reply.

* * * * *

"Strange—very strange!" mused John Dennis, when he was alone. "They come

from America. Can 'it be that Willford is only a cat's-paw, and that they have stumbled upon the right track after all these years?"

"There is a trust," thought Alexander ; "but what did he mean by asking what Willford could have to do with it?"

Why did Alexander thus show his hand? Not from lack of cunning, you may be sure. He had fathomed one phase of John Dennis's character, and had found its soft side. He was a man who would fight to the bitter end if needed, and yet yield everything to a friendly assurance that he was in the wrong. It would be much easier to deal with John Dennis, than with his men of law ; and, if the worst came to the worst, it would be a fine point for the plaintiff's opening to assert how he deplored those unhappy disputes amongst neighbours, and how earnestly he had striven to arrive at an amicable settlement at any sacrifice short of his honour—yes, gentlemen ! his

honour! Besides, there was much to be expected from a quick-tempered man by judicious pumping; not of the vulgar questioning sort, but by throwing out hints and insinuations at which he was likely to fire up. He had fired up already and let out an important admission; "for," argued the acute judge, "when a man begins by getting indignant at an idea and afterwards tries to cast it off by a joke—depend upon it he's hit. There is a trust." "I wish to goodness you were not mixed up with this, Willford," continued the muser, quoting Dennis's words. "I like you Americans, you are true and hearty." "Suppose I appear to put a spoke in Master Stephen's wheel, and be 'true and hearty' for the other side? That might answer. No, he is a gentleman, and would despise me. I must be the candid mutual friend."

John Dennis fell—apparently a willing victim into this plot. The American took great interest in his affairs as intelligent foreigners may. He was taken over the

colliery at Hallowfield, clothed in miner's attire with a candle in his cap, and crawled through most of the workings which would admit his portly person. He was told how the pits were drowned and all but abandoned in the time of their present owner's grandfather; and of the immense expense of pumping them dry and providing against a similar disaster for the future—an expense, however, which was returning a handsome return. He was shown the iron smelting works at Tiffield Brook near Stafford once owned by Dennis, but now worked under a company in which he held half the shares. These also owed their prosperity to the dogged resolution and wise liberality of the squire. By an invention of his own whilst quite a young man, he had quadrupled their productiveness; and doubled this again by extension of the premises. He also learned by ocular proof what draining and chemical manures will do for lands which twenty years ago had served for nothing but to grow rushes

and fever, and to feed geese upon. He was promised if ever he went to Manchester, to be shown over the business there, which was originally established on some old family property, to sell the iron ore at Tiffeld Brook, but was now one of the largest machine and tool manufactories in that busy city. "If you want anything in our line, from a chisel to a steam-engine," said the squire, "pray go to Scott and Dennis. I am sorry I haven't got a card, for I'm only a sleeping partner now." And—crowning favour!—he was introduced to the prize pigs, who allowed him to scratch their sleek and spotless backs, and grunted appreciation of his polite attentions. He was not unfamiliar with the beast that is slaughtered in Maine, and packed at Cincinnati; but the British prize pig as he appears entire in his sty, and afterwards in hot crisp simmering instalments on the grill of a silver bacon dish at breakfast, filled him with admiration and delight.

"I suppose that man," he moralised,

"is not naturally a dirty animal, and if cleanliness can do so much for the pigs, why don't you try it on the peasants."

"My dear fellow, we do, but you see the pigs get washed whether they like it or no, and we cannot do the same thing with the peasants. We give them water, but we can't make them use it. We can give them windows, but we can't open them. They hate cold water and fresh air, and any one who tries to force their use. Education only will remove these prejudices. Why, fifty years ago, ladies and gentlemen were what we should now call abominably dirty! Perhaps before the end of this century the average mechanic will have learned that it is not unwholesome to take a bath and change his shirt; and his wife will know that a room in which four people have slept, requires ventilation."

"You move slowly in these old countries."

"And surely. These very prejudices, stupid as they are, spring from a feeling which is entitled to respect—a dislike by

the poor of interference in their private affairs. A worthy neighbour of mine built some excellent cottages for his labourers ; gave them plenty of water, light, and air, and every convenience for securing decency and health ; but, unwisely, he saddled the enjoyment of them with a condition that the state of their cottages should be inspected once a month. Before the year was out, they had all gone back to their old hovels. They could not swallow inspection."

This conversation led to inquiries into the condition of iron smelters, coal miners, and the skilled hands who worked under Mr. Scott at Manchester. The rate of wages (in these times) suggests the rates of profit ; and thus, whilst apparently interested in the employed, Mr. Alexander gained information which enabled him to make a shrewd guess at the income of the employer.

He found that John Dennis was making an income of at least forty thousand a year

and that his expenditure did not exceed twenty. Why was he saving all this money? For his son? His son would have all he had, *plus* the growing results of the sums he had spent on improvements for his unmarried daughter. Three years' accumulations at their present rate would make a fortune for her. For the sake of hoarding? Free-handed John Dennis was not a man to play the miser. Did he want to leave a will which would make a noise in the world; leaving his wealth to build hospitals, and endow public parks to be called after his name? That also was quite out of his character.

Sometimes—as the weeks passed—the squire would jestingly recur to their talk about Sir Stephen's alleged claim, and ask if they were ready to turn him out yet; but the judge appeared shy of this subject, and, as the young baronet lingered still in London and made no sign, it almost passed from his remembrance.



CHAPTER XV.

HARD AT WORK.



ATAN, who, according to Dr. Watts, "findeth mischief still for idle hands to do," not unfrequently gives out his work by deputy. In the instance of Sir Stephen Willford, this employment was provided by Bessie Raynor and Mr. H. Clay Alexander in the period at which we have arrived. And he had his work to do, serving two masters (or rather, a mistress and a master, who pulled in different directions), and striving to reconcile the claims of business with the pleasanter duties which devolve upon an

engaged man. The lady of his love kept him pretty close to her side, principally for advertising purposes ; and about every other post brought him some such orders as the following from his master :—

“ Search in the State Papers Office, or at the British Museum, for reports of the trial of Lords Lovat, Balmerino, and others, for high treason in 1746 ; see if the name of Denys, or Dennis, is mentioned. If so, send me full extracts.”

“ Go to 19, Salem Row, Islington ; ask for Mrs. Matthews (née McGee), whose husband is a plasterer. Find out if her mother be alive, and get her address. She was a sick nurse.”

“ Look about at second-hand book-stores for ‘Crosbie’s Staffordshire Worthies’ (1798) ; it is out of print.”

“ Go to the Bank of England, and ascertain

what sum in Consols stands in the name of John Dennis, and what part of it was bought in the years 1852-3-4, and in 1865 to the present time."

"Procure copies of all Acts of Parliament relating to the enfranchisement of copyholds, and send them by book post."

"Find out why Gilbert Dennis (1801) did not serve as High Sheriff of Staffordshire. He refused to take the oath. Why? Was he the same Gilbert who went into the Church, and was afterwards a Canon of Lichfield? Search at the Crown Office in the Temple, and look up old clergy lists."

"Who is that your father mentions in his diary as 'Jeremy,' and 'poor Jeremy'?"

This is, perhaps, enough to show that Alexander was at work at Warnstead, and that Miss Bessie had to dispense with a good deal of attention from her lover.

So hard at work was Alexander, that his entertainer seldom saw him, except at meal times. He went away occasionally for several days, and once was absent for a week ; when he came back, his " Gladstone bag " was labelled MANCHESTER.

Long before this, George D'Esmonde had brought his sister to the Grange, where Percy became a constant and welcome visitor. Why not ? The only reason which had hitherto made him hold aloof was removed. Mr. Dennis had let Sir Stephen understand that by-gones were to be by-gones. No one could say that he (Percy) was taking sides now. He had got accustomed to a lonely life in the old baronet's time, and since ; but the visit to his mother, the companionship of George, and the unostentatious and thorough-bred hospitality of the Grange, woke him up, so to speak. And you must remember that "love's young dream" had illumined his corner of the gloomy old house in the days that were passed, and peopled it with bright and

hopeful creations. It was pleasant to sit alone over his fire, and think of Bessie in those days, never to come again. To forget her was now the wise and the proper thing to do. And this could be best done in company.

He called at the Grange the day after Fanny D'Esmonde's arrival, and met her in the avenue, returning from a stroll to the village, with Miss Dennis and George.

George was very glad to see him. A gentleman who is escorting two ladies is not unfrequently gratified by the advent of a second mate of his species.

Fanny held out both her hands, and opened her face to him, like a fearless maid of Dixie, who feels a welcome and is not ashamed to show it.

How did she like the Grange?

"Like" was no word to use. "Do try and imagine," she said, "that you have passed your life in a place where all the houses are built square, and all the furniture stamped out (apparently) by the same

machine, and all the carpets designed as though the upholsterers were in caboot* with the oculists; where nic-nacs are unknown, and bric-a-brac has not entered; where every thing is new, and you know exactly where to go and buy its like—and then find yourself transported into yonder beautiful, bewildering, lovable, *awful* old house, and be asked how you like it!”

“Why ‘awful’?” asked Percy, without noticing the covert reproach.

“Because of its memories. You said there was no ghost. The air is full of ghosts!”

“I hope they don’t keep you awake at night?”

“No; but they send me dreaming by day. Three hundred years! Only think what changes, what events have passed round those dear old walls—what footsteps have passed that threshold! Of course the house was occupied by Cromwell, or some of his crop-eared set (I can’t bear the

* League.—P.D.

Roundheads, they were so like Yankees); and perhaps Prince Rupert surprised them, and there was a fight where we stand. But why stop at the Stuarts? Three hundred years takes us back to Tudor times, or my dates are wrong. Queen Elizabeth might have stopped here on one of her progresses. She may have mounted her horse by those very steps, with Raleigh (poor, ill-treated Raleigh !) at her bridle, and the Dennis of the day presenting the stirrup-cup! I can almost see it with my eyes open, and hear the clink of the swords as the gallants hurried out when the trumpets sounded 'boot and saddle.' Leicester may have leaned against that tree, and thought of Amy Robsart. Oh, if it were only like Tennyson's talking oak, and could tell tales! Bacon may have sat on that seat, and—"good gracious!" she cried, letting enthusiasm melt away into fun, "the ghost of Lord Raleigh may revisit the spot, and be shaking his head at me for talking such nonsense!"

"It is the pleasantest nonsense I have heard for a long time," Percy said, under his voice.

Was there a spell in her eager, flushed face, with its bright, honest eyes, to make him feel just a little faint and sleepy, and to wish that the voice would go on for ever, so that he were there to listen?

What a change from Bessie's fast talk! Bessie's ideas of Queen Elizabeth and her times would have been based upon a burlesque at the "Strand."

They are progressing at the rate of about a mile in three hours—Percy flicking at loose stones in the path with the loop of his hunting crop, and his companion lost (perhaps) in one of her day dreams—but as the distance to be travelled was under sixty yards, they did get in at last; and found John Dennis in the hall, just returned from his usual mid-day visit to those interesting prize pigs.

"Whenever I come in," said Fanny, after a vigorous assault upon the mat, which

Percy watched with interest, "I find something new—no, that won't do at all—I mean some dear old thing that I have not seen before, to wonder at——"

"Then," replied the Squire, shaking his finger at her, "we must lock you up inside, or the Grange will lose its character."

"Prisoners are inquisitive. Who knows what I might discover if you kept your threat," Fanny replied.

"The family skeleton perhaps."

"I don't think you have one, Mr. Dennis. You are all too nice and happy for that."

"Thank you, Miss D'Esmonde."

He was making for his "den," as he called it, a small room which opened from the hall, when she joined him with two skips and a slide. "I've never been in there, have I? Mayn't I see?"

"Certainly, but—well, come in," said the Squire.

There was nothing extraordinary about the "den" except its wainscoting, which,

like the rest of the old part of the house, was of black carved oak. A study table, some models of agricultural instruments, fishing tackle, a few iron boxes such as lawyers use for their clients' papers, two or three half-burnt briar-wood pipes on the mantel-piece—but no ornaments, no wonder as yet. Nothing to interest a young lady. But as it was in the days of Abomelique, so it is in the reign of Victoria. Young ladies are inquisitive. There were indiscreet explorers before Fatima, I have no doubt, and the mildest approach to a Blue Chamber is a happy hunting ground for these modern sisters. Take them to the Temple Church and to luncheon at your chambers afterwards, and notice the avidity with which the dear creatures will plunge into the most common-place recesses of your domain!

Fanny walked demurely into the den, and looked around. "Dear me, Mr. Dennis," she said, "what can you possibly want with a sewing machine?"

"A sewing machine!" he repeated, giving a quick look round, as though one of those useful implements might have rambled into his domain during his absence.

"Yes. Isn't that a sewing machine?"

That was a heavy square table, covered, all but about four inches of its surface, by an oblong box about three feet high. It was certainly very like an exaggerated Wheeler and Wilson; particularly as shadow hid the lower part where the treadles might have been.

Mr. Dennis shook his head. It was not a sewing machine.

"Then what is it?" Fanny demanded. Instinct told her there was a *wonder* here.

"Something which I do not show to everybody."

"But I'm not everybody."

He looked for a moment into the frank young face, and replied gravely, "No, my dear; you are not. I will show it to *you*."

He opened a drawer in his writing-table,

took out a key, unlocked the fastening of the cover, and lifted it.

"Oh, Mr. Dennis, how curious! how beautiful!! how wonderful!!!" she exclaimed, her admiration rising chromatically as the object uncovered met her view. "What is it? What can it be for? Oh! look at those little demons scurrying out of the window, and the big demon lying in wait for them with his club on the roof! Was anything ever so perfect! And those gnomes!—they *are* gnomes, are they not? peering from under the foundations—how quaint! It must be immensely valuable."

"The materials are gold, silver, and iron."

"*Please* don't talk of materials; I was thinking of the art. Look at the grace and softness of that climbing rose, and the beauty of the angel's face! It cannot be Chinese?"

"No. It is English."

"And old?"

"Very old."

"Oh, Mr. Dennis, would it be asking too much if ——"

"If what?"

"Will it open?"

"Yes."

"To—to ask if I might see the inside?"

"It is not in my power to show you the inside, Miss D'Esmonde."

"Oh, now I'm afraid I have offended you. I'm so sorry."

"You have not offended me," he replied kindly. "I have never seen it open myself." It was on the tip of her tongue to ask "Why do you hide it here?" but she checked herself in time, and stood almost spell-bound before the wonder.

It was a sort of Morresque Temple, or Palace, upon which a crowd of angels, demons, dwarfs, and creatures half human, half animal, swarmed as bees upon a hive—pouring in and out of the windows, climbing over the roof, attacking and defending the doors.

"I suppose it has been a long time in your family," she said at last, with a sigh, such as one who *feels* art may heave when

contemplation of the beautiful object must be broken off.

"A long time," he answered ; catching the infection, it may be, and sighing too.

"How proud you must be of it!"

"The day I should lose it would be the happiest of my life," he replied.

"It has something to do with that inscription in the dining-room," she cried, turning sharp round upon him. The next instant she could have bitten off her tongue for saying so, but the words started out in spite of her.

"What makes you think that?"

"I—I didn't think it. It came without thinking. It just flashed on me, and I was foolish enough to say it. You must think me very rude," she added, half crying with vexation.

"I will forgive you if you tell me what made it flash upon you," he said, gravely. "Such ideas do not spring from nothing."

"I suppose it was the look on your face and the sound of your voice. There was

something so *true* in your being happy to give that—that casket up, and this made me think of the line, ‘Let Dennis to Desmond be true,’ that was all.”

“Upon your word?”

“Really, upon my word. Now you are angry.”

“On the contrary, you have pleased me very much.”

“Why here she is,” cried a voice at the door, “flirting with papa and— Oh! look here, Grace, do look here! He has actually shown her the casket; madame,” continued Mrs. Bowring, with a low courtsey, “allow me to do you homage.” Here she threw her arms round the astonished girl’s waist, kissed her, and said, “You are in high favour, dear. He has only uncovered it for us about twice since we were children, and no visitor has ever been allowed to see it. I don’t know why—I am sure. It would look splendid in the drawing-room, but so it is.”

John Dennis replaced the cover, locked it, and answered not a word.

In the hall they found Judge Alexander, who had played the "candid mutual friend" so well as to be reproached for having made himself such a stranger lately. He was duly presented to Miss D'Esmonde, and naturally enough the question how it was that they had not met at home—*i.e.*, in New Orleans—turned up.

"New Orleans," he said, "is a very peculiar city, bar China, and I imagine that it is the most conservative city in the world. It is full of little circles, each one considering itself the centre of its planetary system. If Mr. D'Esmonde had lived in *Jupiter*, and I in *Syrius*, we should not have been separated more than we were; first, by two miles of space, and secondly by thirty years of age."

"Miss D'Esmonde gave my daughter a charming idea of *Jupiter*, at any rate," said John Dennis.

"Yes, she could do so," Alexander replied. "She could show her the surface of what may easily be mistaken for a solid

structure. It is made of as stirring stuff, and takes as high a polish, as anything of the sort in Europe; but it is only veneering, and, like most veneering, very thin. Under it—and pretty thick, to carry out my simile—you find some rough, but reliable material.”

“And underneath that?” asked the squire.

“Whisky and politics.”

“I will not allow you to run down New Orleans, Mr. Alexander,” said Mrs. Bowring, with prettily assumed indignation.

“Madam, those who (to use a Yankee expression) have cracked up my native city, until half its inhabitants became blind with conceit, and helpless with egotism, are less its friends than such as I, who, as you hint, ‘run it down.’ We have many things which ought to be run down, and hunted out, and killed, things which you did not see at *Germans*, or meet of a Saturday afternoon on Canal Street.”

“Are you a Southerner, Judge?” asked his host.

"I was born and bred in the South, sir, and I love it—I love it too well to be blind to its faults. We are a warm-hearted, hot-headed race, Mr. Dennis, we never forget a friend, or forgive an enemy. We can be prudent, logical, statesman-like upon occasion, but introduce one spark of passion, and away goes everything in a blaze! I was a Union man."

"I thought so," said George D'Esmonde, under his breath.

"Yes, sir, a Union man before the war. *I* was one of those who believed in the brain-power of the race from which I spring—the brain-power which made the Union, and for half a century controlled it. *I* was one of those who opposed the brutal, *vulgar* arbitrament of the sword. *I* foresaw what the end would be. *I* am a Republican; therefore, as I before observed, *I* was a Union man."

"Do I understand you to mean that war is contrary to Republican principles?" asked John Dennis.

"Certainly."

"Not even as a defence against abuses and tyranny?"

"No."

"And this although your Republic owes its being to a successful revolt?"

"Yes. What creates may destroy. A century ago we fought a Monarchy to make a Republic—that was right—latterly, we fought a Republic to change a Republic—that was wrong. Republics are changed by ballots, not by bullets."

"Look at South America."

"Aye! look at South America, and tremble at the thought of what might have befallen the grandest nation on God's green earth, if your folly had succeeded in driving home the first wedge! The smoke still hangs over our battle-fields, and no wholesome breeze has yet arisen to blow it away. The dead are unburied, and the wounded unhealed; but the time will come when every good Southerner will rejoice that it ended as it did, and every good Northern man

lament that his people were not more moderate in their victory. This generation must pass away first. It cannot, or will not, think. That is what is the matter with it. It raves, and swaggers, and plots, but it won't *think*. Good heavens! for us to fight—we, who could not even make ourselves a gun—to fight! It was worse than treason—it was stupidity. This, I am afraid, Mrs. Bowring, will take no more 'running down.' ”

“ Oh, I don't pretend to understand your politics,” replied the lady addressed, “ I was talking of your—your——”

“ *Veneering*? Exactly. Now I am as proud as any one can be of our polish, only I want it to go a good deal deeper, to spread a good deal wider; I want it to produce something beyond an ear for music and a taste in dress. You are not to judge of the civilization of a place by the clothes and manners of its *belles* and its dandies, the class of music produced at its opera, or other such outward shows. Go to the

prisons, the hospitals, the asylums, and seek it there."

"Won't you add, in our case, the charitable institutions?" asked George D'Esmonde.

"No," Alexander replied, with decision. "No test of true civilization is to be found where sectarianism and bigotry prevail. On the contrary. Mark me, Mr. D'Esmonde, I shall not see the day, but perhaps you will, when a struggle against priestcraft—which, in comparison to what is now going on in Germany, will be as a tornado to the whisk of a lady's fan—will sweep over the country."

"Don't let us drift into a religious discussion," sensible John Dennis suggested.

"No fear, sir," said Alexander. "When I speak of priestcraft, I am not thinking of religion. Priestcraft, be it Roman Catholic, Protestant, Methodist, Mahomedan, Buddhist, Mormon, what you will, speaks the same language for the same demand—'Give me up your reason and your vote, or I will damn your soul.'"

“Many of our charitable institutions,” persisted Fanny, not to be daunted by the full-flavoured word which made the judge’s last sentence explode like a cracker, “are *not* sectarian, and consequently there can be no bigotry.”

“My dear young lady, you are told so, and you are sincere in believing what you hear. You see—let us drop words which might offend, and say—you see a few Buddhist children being educated in an institution supported by the votaries of Mumbo Jumbo. You are told that an attempt is made to influence their religious belief, and you go away, saying, ‘Dear me, how liberal these Mumbo Jumbo people are.’ Don’t you know that the whole place reeks of Mumbo Jumbo? that the minority eat him and drink him and breathe him, and have him soaked right through and through them, without a word said or act done? It is as though some one were to say, ‘Oh, this pond of mine is kept perfectly dry; you can put a child up to his neck in the water,

and no attempt whatever will be made to wet him.' That's what you hear. Is it common sense?"

"That's a good idea of yours about words," said John Dennis, "and should be universally adopted. What a deal of anger, hatred, and malice would be avoided if polemics would use algebraical signs, call predestination, *a*, the pope, *b*, the secular power, *c*, science, *d*, works, *e*, faith, *f*, and so on."

"With *x*, the sign of an unknown quantity, for charity," Alexander summed up.

"That's severe, judge."

"Severity, sir, under certain circumstances, is only another name for kindness. My endeavour to check injudicious praise of my native city is conceived in kindness. We are an idle, an affectionate; and an easily contented people. We like to be liked, but it isn't good for us. We want to be shaken out of our idle ways, to be convinced that a few things worth having or doing, which were not "before the war,"

are to be had, and done now ; to understand that if we stand still whilst all the rest of the country is moving, we shall either be run over, or left out of the race."

"Don't you think, papa, dear," suggested Grace, when the judge had taken his departure, "that Mr. Alexander is just a little oppressive?"

"Well—ll—he's got a pompous way—y, but he's a superior sort of man," pater-familias decided.

"I agree with Grace," said Mrs. Bowring. "He *is* oppressive. A sort of diluted Dr. Johnson ; but I forgive that for the sake of his earnestness. He means what he says, and says what he means."

"I think so, too," said John Dennis. "He is a very superior man."



CHAPTER XVI.

THE TRUST ACCORDING TO MR. ALEXANDER.



HE leading counsel in the case of the Diagonal Railway Company *v. Dennis*, was Spencer Saxon, Q.C., who in those days led the bar in the Rolls Court, and might have sat on its bench, had ambition spurred him, and outside fortune proved less kind. He had made more than a competency in his profession, he was a bachelor without a blood relation that he cared for, his health was not up to the incessant strain, mental and physical, which a great legal business imposes, and, lastly, a grateful but eccentric client left him a bright little gem of a place

near Harrow, which invited repose. Now a leader of the bar must not repose. He must go on at the head of the tide, or else cast anchor. Spencer Saxon was not sorry to cast anchor in so pleasant a harbour. He kept up his chambers in Lincoln's Inn, belonged to two or three quiet clubs, bought a picture now and then, played whist, was a great pillar of the drama, and never sighed for the gold embroidered robes which his juniors won.

John Dennis became his friend, before chance made him his client. Jack was his god-son. Grace was his special pet. His Christmas was generally spent at the Grange, and the house in Eaton Square was his second home. Upon such a footing, there was nothing strange in this telegram.

"Breakfast with me to-morrow, and give me two hours afterwards.—John Dennis.

The family had come up to town for the season, some week or two since.

"You remember that affair with the


Diagonal Railway?" Dennis began, when they had seated themselves for the "two hours." "Well, it's come up again, but in a different way."

"Indeed. The young man wants to throw some good money after bad, I suppose. It isn't the Railway?"

"You are right. He has picked up a man in America—a very superior, and I think honest, man and a relative—who has certainly put together an extraordinary case against me. I want you to tell me what to do."

"My advice is Abernethy's—'*take advice*,'" said Saxon. "Go to your solicitors."

"This is not a case for solicitors," Dennis replied, a little hurt, and unconsciously echoing Alexander's words. "I want a friend, such a friend as Willford has, confound him! and I come naturally to you. You won't let any of that trade union humbug called 'professional etiquette' stand in the way of doing me an immense service, will you, Saxon?"



"I certainly will not, if the service be one I can properly perform."

"It is to see this man—Alexander is his name, he was once a judge—and hear Sir Stephen Willford's case."

"You don't mean to say that he shows his cards?"

"I do. Your words remind me of the beginning of what I have to explain. He came to me first of all about that affair of young Willford's with Jack—you remember—cheating at 'loo,'—and persuaded me that it was not so bad as it looked. I was too hard upon the boy, Saxon; I saw it directly; but I would not give in at first. Then, when I went to tell him that his friend might come back, he stopped me, and said it was fair I should know that a claim would be made upon the Grange, Hollowfield, and King's Morton properties."

"That's not showing his cards. That's only naming the stakes."

"Wait. Of course I went through the usual form—referred him to my solicitors

and that. He told me Sir Stephen would have no law—or that *he* wouldn't, which seems to be the same thing, for he is the mainspring of it—that he would convince me I ought to give up those lands. In short, he made it an affair of honour, and was as frank and open about it as a man can be."

"With authority from Sir Stephen?"

"I tell you, Saxon, Sir Stephen is his puppet. He has more brain in his little finger than all the Willfords that ever were whelped."

"That may be ; still, I don't like people who are frank and open in other folk's accounts without their authority. A good deal of pumping is sometimes done that way ; but go on."

"There was no pumping. He did not even once ask what I had to say. He simply stated the case upon which they would rely."

"And you think him a superior man?" sighed the Q.C.

"If he isn't, you'll beat him all the easier when you meet."

"Oh! I am to meet him?"

"He threw out some hints several weeks ago," said Dennis; "but it was only the day before yesterday that he made his full statement. I told him we were not fairly matched—I wasn't a lawyer—and that I must have some one to act for me, just as he was acting for Willford. Of course, I thought of you. Now, he's an ex-judge; he's not working this up as a lawyer, but as Willford's relative and friend. There can be no possible reason why you shouldn't listen to what he has to say as *my* friend."

"One question. He said he would convince you. Has he done so?"

"Look here, Saxon. If a man throws down the ace and the king of trumps, you admit you're beaten, because you know the value of the cards. In this case I don't pretend to know it. What he says is an ace may be nothing, the king may be only

a knave in disguise, and I may hold the queen. You *do* know the cards."

"Hum! I should have liked a more positive answer. To tell you the truth, Dennis, I'm afraid of you. This man has got on your weak side. You would strip the coat off your back if some one who had wormed his way into your confidence told you you *ought* to give it away. Be ruled by me; tell them to file their bill and be d——d to them, and fight it out, as before, in court."

"I would rather not go into court."

"Absurd! I remember your old suit well. There's no man in England can oust you."

"I would much rather not go into court against Sir Stephen Willford," Dennis repeated. "If what Alexander has shown me stands your investigation, I can——"

Here he checked himself, and bit his lips.

"What was it he showed you?" Saxon asked.

"I would rather you had it direct from himself. He is in London. We can meet to-morrow."

"I am only to sift his case, then, not defend yours?"

"Precisely."

"He agrees to this?"

"He does."

"Well, of all the—never mind. Be it so then, on one condition: Sir Stephen must be present. I'll have no playing fast and loose; making out one case now, and another hereafter, and prating about honourable efforts at compromise."

"I will tell him to bring Sir Stephen. When and where shall it be?"

"At my chambers. Two o'clock will suit me."

"I am authorised to make the appointment, so that settles it. Two o'clock at your chambers. Till then I'll try and get it off my mind. Come and dine with us to-day? I want to introduce some nice

Americans. Let us be jolly whilst we may," said John Dennis.

This happened the last week of April, two months after the day on which he had shown the casket to Fanny D'Esmonde.

It is a wise social law which ordains that when people meet to do each other deadly mischief they should be more than usually polite. Judged by their demeanour, the party of four which assembled at Mr. Saxon's chambers might have met to present each other with pieces of plate, as feeble tributes of mutual respect and regard. Judge Alexander was especially flowery.

"Your name, Mr. Saxon," he said, on being introduced, "is not unknown to me. I esteem it a high honour to have the privilege of your acquaintance. I recognise in you—if you will allow me to say so—a foe-man worthy of my steel. I have in my mind your argument in the case of *Smith v. Huxtable*—a most admirable and ex-

haustive exposition of the law ; one, sir, which is incorporated in our best text books."

"Suppose," replied the Q.C., quietly, "that we proceed to business."

"Good," said Alexander, taking the chair at the head of the table on which the Q.C.'s briefs were once spread, and motioning Sir Stephen to face him. "With your permission, I will sit here, where I shall have plenty of room for my documents."

As he spoke he produced, from a courier-bag, several papers neatly folded, which he piled round him in little heaps, patting and smoothing them as though they were living pets. He was very particular to place them perfectly straight, and at equal distances one from the other.

Saxon and John Dennis took the vacant seats on each side, and waited for him to open fire. Dennis, you know, had heard the story before ; the Q.C. was there to listen.

Whatever amount of rope Mr. H. Clay

Alexander might demand would be cordially conceded. Having arranged his papers to his satisfaction, he gave the usual preliminary *ahem!* and began—

“I was not without some credit in my own country, Mr. Saxon, for a capacity to arrange facts, and a certain lucidity in stating their relative value and the application they bear to each other. If this be not apparent now, it will be because, like yourself, I have grown a little rusty. To begin, then. What is our motive in meeting you here? Speaking for Sir Stephen Willford, who is present to sanction and confirm every word I say” (the baronet bowed), “I reply that our motive is, in one word, *Peace*. There have been jealousies, there have been heart-burnings, there have been quarrels between the families of Willford and of Dennis. There arises now a question which, if unwisely handled, might stir the ashes of old conflicts into flame. It is our desire so to handle it, as not only to ensure its amicable settlement, but to pave

the way for a sincere and lasting reconciliation. We will not go to law unless we are driven. We come, with our hearts upon our sleeves, into a court of honour, in which we propose to give you the opportunity, so prized by honourable men, of acknowledging and atoning for a wrong. Such is our motive. What is yours? To——”

“Excuse me,” the Q.C. interrupted. “I think I had better state our motive. It is simply that I may be enabled to advise Mr. Dennis on the legal value of your case.”

“Leaving him to judge the *moral* force of such facts as survive your scrutiny. That is so. We may now commence in earnest. By a deed bearing date the fifth day of August, 1615, King James the First granted certain freehold lands in Staffordshire, known now as the Grange and Hallowfield Estates, and forming part of the town of King’s Morton, to one Stephen Willford, to hold for himself and his heirs for ever. His namesake, the present baronet, is his heir. Of that I presume there

is no doubt. In the year 1626—I am glad to see you taking notes—this Stephen Willford died, and Charles, his eldest son, inherited those freeholds. I am afraid he was not quite right in his mind. He went to America (not that *that* is any evidence of insanity),” said the judge, with a smile; “but his conduct when there was eccentric, to say the least of it. A short time before his departure, the first Dennis—or Denys, as it was written then—by name Gregory, appears upon the scene *as his servant*.”

“That is one of the facts I deny,” whispered John Dennis across the table.

“Let him speak for himself in his letters, which I shall notice in their proper order,” the orator replied, with a wave of his hand. “I say he appears on the scene as his servant; what he became, he shall also state for himself. It was only in 1634 (as shown by the late chancery suit) that he assumed to possess and control those lands. Now, what happened between 1626 and 1634 to give Gregory Dennis (let us say ‘Dennis’)

and his heirs possession of what was undisputably the property of Charles Willford and his heirs? In the late suit you, in effect, said 'find out.' We have found out. Nothing happened. Gregory Dennis was a mere trustee."

Saxon, Q.C., made a movement which seemed to say (in a whisper) "*Now for it.*"

"I have here photographic copies of four letters written by this Gregory Dennis to this Charles Willford. If we were in court you would say, 'Show how you can prove that the one wrote, and the other received them, before you refer to their contents. I will ask now, here, in this private room, with the same regularity that Mr. Saxon himself would observe, were he before the highest court of justice in the land. I can show that they were found in a box left by Charles Willford at Baltimore, amongst papers undisputably his. I can show that Gregory Dennis (originally a working smith), prospered so that he became Borough Reeve of Manchester, and that

amongst the archives of the present Corporation, there exist public notices, orders, and other official acts, some entirely written, and others signed by him. I was permitted to take photographic copies of them, and here they are for comparison. The character is peculiar. Judge for yourself if these letters, and those orders, are or are not written by the same hand. May I say now," he added, when Saxon had glanced over two of the photographs which the orator selected and handed him, "that I have four letters written by Gregory Dennis to Charles Willford?"

"For the purposes of the present conversation you may," replied the cautious man of law.

"The letter which you have before you is the least important of the four. I produce it mainly to show the relative position of these correspondents. The writer, you will observe, acknowledges the receipt of certain 'commands,' which it will be his 'humble duty' to perform, and so on—

much, I take it, as a servant would write. This, the next in order, is quite in the same tone, only that it seeks approval of what he had done, as a servant (according to my contention) again. The third, which is dated after a lapse of some years (and which I take somewhat out of its turn, for the purpose of brevity), is important only as bearing upon the pedigree of Sir Stephen. It comments upon the news (conveyed, of course, by Charles himself) that he had married, and was a father. You can peruse these at your leisure. For the fourth—for every word of it—I bespeak your kindest attention. It is dated the 2nd day of June, 1630, and its contents are as follows ;

* “ ‘ *Most honourable Sir,*

“ ‘ *Most welcome was thy letter, the
wh found me in goode health on Ladye daye.
What wondrous things thou dost relate, what
peryls thou hast braved. Of a surety,
honourable Sir, thou wilt have thy reward*

* Taken from the photographic copy.—P. D.

in ye ende, wh God grante may notte be farr distante. Thy poor servant hathe lyttle to recounte. I have found a tenant for ye large house at ye King's Morton, one Simon Thorpe, a solyd mann, and a God-fearing, the wh is well, as I could have butt his worde for ye covenant, not being able to make a lease.'

("I trust that last phrase has not escaped you," the orator observed, lowering his glasses, and tapping the paper with them, "NOT BEING ABLE TO MAKE A LEASE.")

" ' Saving for pasturage of beasts, Hallow Field is of noe wrthe. Dicke, ye forrester, who hath much skylle in suche thyngs, has tolde me thatt the woods do stande in need of thynning, for that ye greater trees do smother up ye lesser, so that theye may not groe stronge, the wyche shalle be done, and the timber solde at good profyt. Feare not that ye Grange shalle be welle cared for, for hys dear sake.'

("Here, then," observed the orator, "we find the three properties—that at King's Morton, Hallowfield, and the Grange—mentioned, and an account of what had been done, or proposed to be done, upon them, rendered. In what capacity? Mark well what follows.")

"In fyne and to conclude, be sure that all things shall be done to the beste of my humble duty, as though thou werst thy own selfe here presente. If thine honourable desire may be wone, and God grante itt maye be, what greate joy will be ours, butt if it please Hym not, I and mine will be loyal and true to our truste, though a hundred years should passe. Loyal and faithful, according to the oath we have sworn."

"And this is signed *Gregory Denys*, with the same flourish underneath, and the same peculiar formation of the *gs* and *ys* that we find in these authentic public records at Manchester.

"We rely upon this letter," said the orator, placing it before him on the table, and pressing it softly with the palm of his hand, "as containing a declaration of trust, or, at the least, containing sufficient evidence of a pre-existing trust, to put you to the proof of your title. In the face of this letter we contend that you cannot meet us—as in the railway case—by pleading the Statute of Limitations. If you say, 'We have held these lands against the world, as owners, since 1634,' we reply, 'Here is an acknowledgment, dated 1630, that you had merely the care of them as trustees.'

"I need not remind Mr. Saxon of the jealousy with which your law regards transactions of bargain and sale of the subject of a trust, between trustee and cestui-que-trust. Any conveyance of these lands by a Willford to a Dennis must have been effected with due precautions, and by formal instruments. Where are these? Produce the deeds, and we will tender our apologies for giving you all this trouble, and retire."

"Is that your case, Mr. Alexander?" asked the Q.C., without replying to an appealing look from Dennis.

"Oh dear no! To be perfectly candid with your friend, as I have been throughout, I admit that his counsel (should he force us into court), might pick holes in this letter" (caressing it again) "if it stood alone. It does *not* stand alone, Mr. Saxon; it gave me the clue to discoveries which will astonish you. I have gone through the dusty records of these two houses, as a miner digs for gold. Fatigue has not checked, or failure daunted me. My labours have been intense—immense! I have piled around me mountains of worthless trash; after having turned over every stone, and brought all the energies of my mind to bear upon every fragment. I have followed veins, full of promise, which turned out to be false. The floods of disappointment have burst in upon me, but I never gave way to despair, and why? For the hope of reward? No. I made it a personal

affair with myself. I said, 'There is success to be attained, for the instincts of your intellect—never at fault—tell you so. You must attain it, or be false to yourself.'"

"Perhaps we had better return to business," said Spencer Saxon, as dryly as before.



CHAPTER XVII.

"A BAD DAY'S WORK FOR JACK."



HE orator did not like this dryness on the part of Spencer Saxon. It put him out of swing. He loved the sound of his own voice, and the taste of his own words. He loved a good listener who would wince as the hits told, or follow his discourse with some signs of admiration or approval. He might as well have talked at the Sphinx as at Saxon, Q.C., so far as eliciting smiles or frowns is concerned.

Put his manner into words, and its menacing commentary was something like,

“Pooh, pooh!—do get on with all this foolishness, and let’s have it over.” Now this was not pleasant to a man like H. Clay Alexander, but he kept his temper, and changed not his style.

“The history of the Dennis family,” he recommenced, “and of the times in which they lived for more than a century after the death of Gregory, the whilom smith, gives me no fact upon which I care to rely. The object of my laborious search—the point upon which all my powers of argument and deduction were concentrated, was to find in the conduct of this family, in its own circle, and from its dealings with the outer world, some corroboration of Gregory’s letter—some admission that a trust had been created, and consequently continued to exist. With Sir Stephen’s assistance I discovered the first link of the chain. It is to be found in the words of the State Trials which followed the abortive invasion of England by the young Pretender in 1746. I have here an extract from a paper

found in the possession of one Silas Mitchell (a creature, and agent in rebellion, of Lord Lovat) in which he had noted down what money, forces, and other assistance was promised by the various malcontents in the midland counties whom he visited. In short, he was a sort of collector sent round for subscriptions, and this—in the middle of a long list—is the result of his application to the Dennis of that day. The “y” was dropped by this time.

Dennis, Wybert, and 50 men asked for money—says he has none, asked to raise some on his title deeds—says he has none, asked to borrow on mortgage of his estate—says he has no estate to mortgage.

“All hearsay,” smiled Saxon.

“All hearsay so far, but when Wybert Dennis was arrested and taken before the Privy Council, he not only adopted it, but based his defence upon it very cleverly. The figures ‘50 men,’ he argued, ‘were written against my name as a sort of assessment before I was visited. What follows

is a series of excuses, palpably idle. The Prince was in force at Derby, and I dared not flatly refuse.' This saved his head."

"And kills your case," Saxon remarked.

"This," said the other, leaning back in his chair, "is another instance of our candour, and one which I hoped had produced respect rather than a sneer."

"Pardon me," said the Q.C., "you must admit, Mr. Alexander, that I have seldom interrupted you, though you must be aware that not a few of your points challenge objection. I will not offend again."

"This Wybert," continued Alexander, "appears to have been a roystering reckless sort of person. He had not been a week out of jail when he again compromised himself, this time to his neighbour, another Charles Willford, and a Jacobite at heart, but one of those who 'let I dare not wait upon I would,'—oh! I am not going to spare any of you. It was this cautious Willford who cajoled the more open Dennis into the Pretender's cause, and amongst the papers

he left (why he kept it I cannot say ; perhaps to have a hold over the writer) I find this letter.

“ ‘*Dear Friend and loving neighbour,—*

“ ‘*You have heard how finely I hoodwinked those rascal whigs, but 'twas a narrow escape won by a head. Dost take ? I must have been drunk when that fellow Mitchell came. In vino veritas. 'Twas well for me I stopped where I did ; else had it been a fine thing for thee. Send me a hundred pounds, for I am in much need of money ; and bid my steward pay thee if he can, or else give thee a note charged on the next rents, like the others, and oblige,*

“ ‘*Ever thine to command,*

“ ‘*W. Dennis.*’

“I call your attention to the phrase *in vino veritas*, meaning that he had told Mitchell the truth ; and also to those remarkable words, *it would have been a fine thing for thee*.

"I now come to the year 1801, when a vastly different Dennis was master of the Grange — Gilbert. He was an austere, highly religious man, and having been *pricked*, as you call it, as High Sheriff of Staffordshire, refused to serve. Why, think you ?

"Because he could not take the oath that he was a freeholder of the county !

"Proofs thicken as I come to our own times," the orator continued, having left his last point to be absorbed for a few moments whilst he consulted his notes. "John Dennis, the father of our friend here, died quite a young man. He was nursed in his last illness by a woman named McGee, who also laid out his body for the grave.

"This woman is now alive, and is living at Tewksbury, where I saw her last week in the presence of a witness, as I am always particular to guard myself against the possibility of it being supposed I could suggest or dictate answers. I simply asked her what passed, and from a great deal that is

wholly immaterial, I winnowed this statement :—That on the morning of the funeral John Dennis senior took his last look at the face he had loved. McGee was in the room. He passed some time in prayer by the open coffin, and when he rose from his knees he flung up his hands with a gesture of despair, and sobbed, ‘ *All above now! no one but a child to carry on the Trust. Oh, God! spare me till he is a man, and can understand his duty.*’

“So much for the past. Excuse me if I recapitulate. We have Gregory writing, ‘I and mine will be loyal to the Trust;’ Wybert confessing that he had no land of his own; Gilbert doing much the same; and John praying to be spared to teach this Mr. Dennis his duty as trustee. He lived long enough to do so. Now for the present. This Mr. Dennis keeps the accounts relating to the Grange, Hallowfield, and King’s Morton estates separate from those of his other property. He invests the net receipts also separately, and does not

spend one penny of them. They stand in consols in the Bank of England. They are added to year after year, by purchase of more stock of that very safe but rather unremunerative character. He, at any rate, has prepared himself to give a strict account of his trust. I state this with the utmost respect and admiration. When I ascertained these facts (again with the assistance of my young friend), I said to myself, 'Whatever other Dennises may have been, *this* one is a man of honour; this is not one to skulk into a court of justice in the hope of finding some quibble for his defence; this is one to be convinced, and to do right upon conviction, as surely as the day follows the night.'

John Dennis flushed crimson, and was about to reply, when a gesture from Saxon checked him.

"This," resumed Alexander, collecting his papers, "is our case. What is the demand we make upon it? We require the restoration of the estates I have named

as they stand. We make no claim for *mesne profits*, first because we are aware that a large portion of them have been expended upon legitimate improvements; and, secondly, because we are willing to make some sacrifice on our part to obtain a speedy and amicable adjustment. As Mr. Dennis has acquired a naturally strong affection for the house called 'the Grange,' we will let it, and the land in its immediate vicinity, to him at a rent hereafter to be agreed upon. In order that this settlement may be private, and give no cause for scandal, we are willing to go through a fictitious sale. We will let it appear as though Mr. Dennis had *sold* us his land, and will support any excuse (if excuse be required) for his doing so. This done, we will count ourselves, if he will permit us, amongst his sincerest friends and well-wishers."

"And if these terms be not accepted?" asked Saxon.

"Then war to the knife," the judge replied with the utmost sauvity.

"Mr. Dennis," said the Q.C., "has heard your statement before to-day; but I have had no opportunity of discussing it with him, as he wished me to hear it first from yourself. Will you excuse us if we consult together for a short time? I have another room at the end of the passage. Pray don't move."

"I trust Mr. Dennis will find it convenient to decide to-day, because——"

Alexander hesitated. He could imply more by breaking off than by going on.

"Yes?"

Saxon wanted to hear the "because" out.

"Because, sir, when people act in the very exceptional manner in which we have acted, they expect frankness for frankness. You know your own case. It must lay in a nut-shell. Half an hour should suffice to decide what is to be your reply to ours. We will give you half an hour."

* * * * *

Saxon had hardly closed the door of that

"other room" (which had been the sanctum of his head clerk in his busy days), when Dennis confronted him with a hoarse, "Well?"

"I think," Saxon replied, "that your superior man is either a most consummate rascal, or—yes; for the present it will be best to consider him a rascal."

"Let him alone. What of the case he makes out?"

"It may cause you a great deal of trouble and annoyance; but of course there is nothing serious in it."

"You think so?" cried the other, eagerly.

"Why, how can there be? What is the matter with you to-day, Dennis? You look as though you had seen a ghost. Sit down there, and let us talk it over quietly. To begin with. Do you keep separate accounts for the Manchester business and for the smelting works?"

"Certainly I do. How else could I know how I stood?"

"Well, that disposes of one of his so-

called points—the keeping of separate accounts for the Grange, and so on,” said Saxon. “Now tell me who is this McGee?”

“The best of a bad lot. They lived in the village. Don’t you remember that night poaching case in which my keeper Tarrant lost his arm? Two of her brothers were in it.”

“That was after your grandfather’s death?”

“Yes; in the year I came of age.”

“And you prosecuted them. So here we have spite and motive in Mrs. Barton, which will justify a close examination of herself and her statement. Did she, or did she not, think it important at the time? If she did, she (woman like) would have told it to some one—which she does not appear to have done, or your superior man would have said so. If she did not, how comes it that she remembers now what passed, after all these years?”

“Thirty-two years!” sighed Dennis.

“But even supposing that your grand-

father really spoke those words, there's nothing in them. I dare say he was trustee for some one—most of us are. Had he spoken so at a dinner-table, one might have been surprised; for those who know what a nuisance trusts are, are not so anxious to burden their children or grandchildren with them; but surely we must not hold a man to the precise words that he sobs out over the coffin of his only son!"

"I was only ten years old then."

"And so know nothing about it. How can you? So much for that. I'm going over our superior man's road, but moving backwards. We now come to that Gilbert who would not be sworn in as High Sheriff. What do you know about him?"

"Very little, except that he went into the Church late in life, and never was married."

"Just the sort of man to have conscientious objections to take any sort of oath. Not much in this. Who comes next?"

“Wybert.”

“The gentleman whose evidence is treated like a ten-pin—put up to be knocked down, and then put up again. He tells Mitchell, the revolutionary bagman, that he has no lands or title-deeds ; he tells the lords of the council that he lied to Mitchell, and he tells Willford that he lied to the lords of the council. A pretty fellow. On one point I do believe him. He was drunk—very drunk—when he saw the Jacobite collector. Is it because he writes the words *in vino veritas* (which I dare say he did not understand), that his drunken gabble is to be taken as Gospel truth after a century and a half has passed away ? But mark the absurdity of what follows. Let us take him as we find him, according to Mr. Alexander. He was a defrauding trustee. He had let slip certain admissions (which if valuable now, were valuable then) tending to an exposure, and he confirms them (for no earthly reason beyond the indulgence of a piece of brag) to the very man most in-

terested in establishing their truth ! Call him roystering and reckless ! You have to prove him an idiot before you can account for this. What is it he writes ?" pursued the Q.C., referring to his notes. "Ah ! here we have it. '*Twas well for me I stopped where I did*' (i.e., in his statement to Mitchell), '*else hadst been a fine thing for thee.*' From which the superior man would have us understand that the writer meant to hint, '*if I had said any more, I should have let the cat out of the bag and you into the estate.*'"

"It does read like that," said Dennis, who had been listening—his head leaning on his hand, and his eyes rivetted upon the floor—to every word Saxon uttered, but without evincing a sign of relief or anxiety, as point after point was attacked and set aside.

"Not with the context as *I* understand it," Saxon replied. "Look here. Wybert owed this Willford money ; 'let him' (the steward) 'give thee a note charged on the

rents, *like the others.*' Well, don't you see that if this reckless roysterer's tongue had lost him his head, by not stopping short where he did, his estate would have been forfeited, and this would have been a 'fine thing' for the one who was a creditor in its rents. The line 'is rit ironical,' as Mr Alexander's witty countryman has it."

"You are a wonderful man, Saxon," said Dennis, looking up. "What a head you have! How you do turn things! I saw only one possible meaning in it; but go on to Gregory Dennis' letter. What of that?"

"That is the pivot on which the whole thing turns. All the rest is invented, or twisted out of its natural shape, to suit it."

"Would it—as Alexander pretends—put me on my defence?"

"I think it would, supposing, of course, that it be genuine."

"I could not rely, as I did before, upon undisputed possession, for generation after generation?" Dennis demanded.

"The cases are entirely different. In the old one you sold land to a railroad, under a promise that you would give them a good title to it, and as no one had disturbed you for the time prescribed by law, you could give it by merely proving that fact. In this new case, the commencement of your title is challenged by the contents of a paper, which—of itself, and until something is produced to contradict it—appears to declare a trust."

"Which would devolve upon me?"

"Which would follow the land for ever. Consequently you would not be allowed, as before, to plead the Statute of Limitations, because it does not affect trusts, but would be obliged to bring your deeds into court—and what then?"

"That is your deliberate opinion?" Denis asked, in a voice that trembled.

"Oh, I'm quite clear about that. You would have to show something better for yourself than Gregory's letter is for Sir Stephen, and there would be an end of it ;

or, rather, you would have to be *prepared* to do so, in the event of that letter being established as genuine, which (bear in mind) it is not yet. We have only Alexander's word for its having been found where he pretends, or for its being in the handwriting of your ancestor."

"It *is* genuine, Saxon," said John Dennis.

"How do you know?"

"I have the answer."

"Good heavens! Are you sure?"

"Quite sure; and there are no two ways of reading it. The letting of the house at King's Morton, the thinning of the trees, the trust, are all referred to, and commented upon."

"If that be so—why—oh, its impossible!" cried the Q.C., starting from his seat, and pacing up and down the room.

"No, it is not," said Dennis, with a sad shake of the head. "You have argued the case splendidly, Saxon, and twisted things round as only a first-rate advocate

can ; but it won't do. Truth is truth. The letter is genuine. I believe that Wybert Denys—drunk or sober—made use of these words, and they were the truth. I believe that Gilbert Dennis acted upon the reasons Mr. Alexander supposed. I *know* that my grandfather—standing over my father's corpse—said the words attributed to him, for I have them under his hand. And, lastly, I *do* invest the rents and profits of the Grange, Hallowfield, and King's Morton estates, because I may one day be called upon to account for them. Mr. Alexander is right upon every point."

"Then," cried the amazed Q.C., "it coes to this : you are, as he said, a mere trustee for Willford ?"

"No ! Ten thousand times, no !" John Dennis almost shrieked ; but Saxon sprang to his side, and checked him manually.

"Hush ! They must not overhear you. Sit down again ; you've over-excited yourself. Let me tell them that you are not well enough to go on to-day."

"I am quite well."

"In body, perhaps, but you have worried your mind into a muddle. You say one thing one moment, and another the next."

"My mind is quite clear, Saxon. Up to a moment ago I consider that I have been unusually cool, considering all things. I flew out because—I cannot tell you why I flew out, Saxon. It's one of my greatest miseries just now, that I cannot confide in you."

"If you are serious in what you say, I don't understand what use I could be to you."

"You have heard Alexander assert that he can put me to the proof of my title, and you—the leading equity man of the day—say that this is so. I am satisfied."

There was manly sadness, strengthened by resolution, in his voice and manner, as he rose to go back to the field of the battle he had lost.

"Stay, John, stay, old friend," pleaded

Saxon, catching him by the arm. "Don't be rash. What are you going to do?"

"Give in."

"Take time, man ! take time to reflect !"

"They will not give it to me."

"D—n them ! fight them !"

"Ah, if I only could !"

"Anyway, do nothing rash ; do nothing at all do-day. Wait and consider. Is there no one you can trust ?"

"That's unkind, Saxon. You know that if I could confide in any one, it would be in you—my oldest and my best friend."

"I detest mysteries," said the Q.C., speaking roughly, to keep down something that was rising in his throat, "and have had quite enough of this. Listen to my last words. Take care that you have a *right* to do this. There are others to think of besides yourself" (here the "something rising" made a great spurt) ; "confound it, man alive ! you mustn't let these romantic ideas of yours ruin your family" (but was caught by the following outburst,

and passed). "There's Grace, you know, and—and—Jack, and—" (for a moment, but the latter had to give way, and was beaten by a length).

"Poor fellow!" sighed John Dennis.

"Yes, it is a bad day's work for Jack."



CHAPTER XVIII.

“LETTE DENYS TO DESMOND BE TRUE.”

JOHNN DENNIS was the first to enter the front room, where he found the baronet and Alexander, each at a window gazing out into the inn garden. Saxon was the first to speak. He spoke quickly, as though he feared interruption.

“I think you will admit, upon reflection, Mr. Alexander, and that Sir Stephen will support me, when I urge that Mr. Dennis should be given more time for reflection. Considering the magnitude of the interests involved, and the labour it has cost you to

get up this case, it is not one to be passed upon off hand."

"It was on Monday, if I remember correctly, that I made a full statement of my views to Mr. Dennis," said the person first appealed to, silencing Sir Stephen with a frown, "and this is Thursday. It was entirely to accommodate him that we consented to this interview, which was understood to be final. Indeed, when you left the room together just now, I was under the impression that the time mentioned was considered sufficient."

"Half an hour!"

"Make it an hour, two, three, if you like. The day is young yet. We are willing to wait. You lawyers are pleasantly located, Mr. Saxon. This prospect must be delightful in summer."

"Psha! Sir, we did not come back to talk about trees!" snapped the Q.C.

"Or to present idle excuses for delay, I hope," retorted Alexander.

"You mean well, old friend," Dennis

whispered, pressing the lawyer's hand, "but it is no use. I am ready, gentlemen, to give you my decision."

"Then, to borrow Mr. Saxon's favourite phrase, 'Let us proceed to business,'" said Alexander, resuming his place at the table, where the baronet joined him; but John Dennis did not move. The hand with which he leaned against one of the great bookcases trembled, and his face was pale as death, but there was no tremor in his voice.

"You have stated a case on behalf of Sir Stephen Willford," he began, "which, in plain English, means that I and my family have deliberately and wickedly defrauded him and his."

"Excuse me," Alexander interposed, "I do not think that the word 'defraud' ever passed my lips."

"That may be, sir, but the meaning of it shrieked out of every sentence you spoke. I thank you for your concluding remarks on myself personally. You did me the credit

to say that I had prepared myself to do what was just; but if by this you meant to insinuate that others of my name were different, it was an insult, which I fling back in your face. Look into the history of your client's race, before you presume to traduce mine."

"Am I supposed to stand this?" cried Sir Stephen, for the first time putting in his word.

"Be quiet!" Alexander interposed. "These personal remarks are irritating, no doubt, but Mr. Dennis is entitled to our most lenient consideration."

"I ask no leniency! What! you have kept me on the rack for an hour, and am I to have no reply? not ten words in defence of as good a man as ever stepped—my honourable and honoured grandfather—and for a line of men to whom the very name of fraud was hateful? Convince me that they were cheats, swindlers, thieves—that's what it comes to? No! not if you were to argue for a lifetime."

"Then we must file our bill," said Alexander, rising.

"Be good enough to resume your chair, and hear me out as patiently as I did you. Convince me of *that* you cannot; but I admit that you have satisfied me in one respect, how or why you will not care to know. I will not resist your claim."

Judge Alexander had taken up a penholder, and was turning it about idly (as it seemed) in his hand. As the last words were spoken, it snapped in two.

"The result is enough for us," he said, trembling all over with suppressed excitement.

Sir Stephen sprang from his chair, and made a dash back to the window, unable to restrain his joy.

"This is quite what I expected of you, Mr. Dennis," Alexander continued, after a pause, "and fully justifies the advice I gave to Sir Stephen from the first. We have striven for peace and reconciliation; I trust we have obtained both."

“Your proposition, that Sir Stephen should lease me the Grange,” said Dennis, “makes me think that he has no necessity for these particular lands. Is that so?”

As he spoke, the baronet came back, stood by his mentor, and plucked him by the sleeve.

“We stand by our terms, every one of them,” Alexander replied.

“You spoke of a fictitious sale of that, and the Hallowfield, and King’s Morton estates.”

“That we presumed would be the manner most convenient to you of transferring them.”

“But does he want—must he have them?”

“I really do not quite understand you, Mr. Dennis. If he does not, why are we here?”

“Would not another sale, also fictitious, but the other way, suit him? In short, will he sell them to me?”

Another pluck at the sleeve.

"I take you now. You offer the cash value of the lands, to buy off our claim?"

"Exactly."

"Well, my reply," said Sir Stephen, "to that is——"

"That it requires consideration. Quite right, Sir Stephen," interposed the judge (this aloud, but the accompanying whisper was, "D—n you, be silent!").

"And how do you propose that the value should be arrived at?" asked Alexander.

"By surveyors—in the usual way—one for each side, only I should take it as a favour if I might *seem* to name both."

"It might be so arranged. Yes, I see no objection about that. The lands would be assessed as they stand?"

"As they stand."

"With all the improvements?"

"With all the improvements."

"And the money paid down."

"It would be a very large sum. I could not promise all at once."

"Oh, Mr. Dennis, consider all those

consols!" urged Alexander, with his pleasant smile.

"They represent about five years' purchase. You would not be content with less than twenty."

"But you are otherwise a very rich man."

"Let that pass, sir. Be assured I will not owe Sir Stephen a shilling longer than I can possibly help. Half the purchase-money shall be paid on assessment, and the rest in six months."

"Good. Now we shall ask your indulgence for just ten minutes, and retire as you did, if you will kindly indicate that other room."

After his third ineffectual attempt to be heard, Sir Stephen relapsed into sulky silence, and sulky he remained when the door of the clerk's room closed behind him.

"It's no use," he growled, "not a bit; I'll have them, if it's only to spite him. You may prate as you like about peace and reconciliation—it has paid so far; but I hate him. I hate him for his popularity,

and I'll take him down. A pretty fellow to drive me out of the country for what he called cheating! Who's the biggest cheat? I wish to God, Alexander, that I had shopped him into court, and let every one know what a cheat he is—I do. I was a fool to let you give in about the *mesne profits*. He couldn't have paid them, and I'd have had his d——d carcass in gaol. No; it's no use glaring at me. You've been as much on his side all through as on mine. I would have got more without you, and I'll not give you half. It's a shame, and you know it."

Alexander looked at him as one might regard a cockroach endowed for a moment with the gift of speech, but to be treated afterwards *as* a cockroach.

"You idiot!" he hissed. "You miserable, ungrateful, utter idiot! Drivel another word, and I will take you to John Dennis, and tell him——" (Here he whispered four words in his ear.)

* * * * *

"You must be mad, Dennis," said the Q.C., when the others had left for their conference. "If they accept, this will half-ruin you."

"It will quite ruin me."

"Yet you persist?"

"It is the only way."

"In the name of common sense, the only way for what?"

"To preserve my honour, Saxon."

After this there was nothing more to be said, and they waited in silence for the verdict.

Alexander kept his promise. In just ten minutes, they were back again. Sir Stephen Willford, his face full of smiles, was now the spokesman.

"My dear Mr. Dennis," he said, "your idea is an excellent one. I have quite as much land at Warnstead as I can conveniently look after, and it would be a thousand pities to lose you out of the county. Let it be as you propose, and everything shall be arranged in the most

convenient manner to yourself. As I am the younger man, it would not be becoming in me to say 'take my hand, in token of reconciliation ;' but I should be both glad and proud, Mr. Dennis, if you would say so to me."

They clasped hands—one of them with sincerity.

"My wretched calling makes me return to sordid considerations, even at such a moment as this," said Alexander. "Life is short ; and who knows where some of us may be to-morrow ? Shall we jot down and initial a little protocol of our arrangement ? Just this, for example."

He took up the broken pen, and wrote—

Upon the case presented by H. Clay Alexander on behalf of Sir Stephen Willford, Mr. Dennis will pay him a sum equal to the assessed value of the Grange, Hallowfield, and King's Morton properties, in full discharge of all claims.

"Now," he observed, having read it over, "that may be read at Charing Cross

by the public crier (if there is one), and not a soul be the wiser ; at the same time, it is satisfactory to my prosaic mind. Now, my dear Sir Stephen, no one doubts your word ; but do oblige an old fellow, who, perhaps, is too punctilious about forms, by signing it."

Sir Stephen was nothing loth, and Dennis, who longed to be alone, set his name also at the foot of the paper, which Alexander carefully folded and placed in his pocket-book.

"You are content now, I hope," snarled the baronet, as they went out.

"Quite content, thank you."

And so he was. The arrangement suited him exactly. He had seen enough of his client's character to know that if he could cheat him out of his share he would not scruple to do so. He knew that shooting people "at sight" in this effete old country, is followed by inconveniences which do not always attach in the freer land of his birth. And, after all, what was the value of re-

venge set against the price of Hallowfield alone. Even if he did not try to cheat him, there would be trouble and delay in dividing the spoil ; although, at the time at which I write, an alien could hold freehold estate in England. There would assuredly be trouble about the lands, but a simple division sum would settle accounts when the claim was paid in cash ! And he would take good care that the payment should be made through him.

And, strange as it may appear, he liked the plan because it seemed to suit John Dennis. Cynics say that we have no more bitter hatred than for those we have wronged : and this man had wronged John Dennis ! Wronged him by worming his way into his confidence, by manufacturing sentiments for Stephen Willford which were false, and in other ways ; but he liked him. He was glad that he offered his hand when that paper was signed, and said, "This is a hard blow, but it might have been more harshly dealt. I have a

good deal to thank you for, Mr. Alexander." But he winced under it, all the same.

Was Dennis sincere? For what had he to thank one who had helped to ruin him? Could the blow have been worse than it was? He knew that it might have been a good deal worse, and as he is the person most interested, the reader must please accept his view. He bore no malice. If he had been deceived as to the direction of Alexander's movements until the fatal day of explanation came, he had no one but himself to blame. The judge had behaved frankly to him, loyally to his friend, and had been a valuable moderator between them. That Sir Stephen was a hypocrite, was as clear to him as the sun at noon. Left alone, he would have turned him out of house and home without the faintest compunction. The compromise was affected through Alexander's influence. For that he had to thank him, and he did so out of the depths of his generous heart.

When the first blow was struck, he telegraphed for Jack—

"Get leave, and come home. I want you. No one ill."

At first he concluded the message "All well;" but this was unfortunately not the case. So he substituted the other words, to relieve anxiety.

He parted with Spencer Saxon at his chambers, and went home.

"Has Captain Dennis arrived?" he asked the janitor.

The Captain had arrived, and was taking a bath after his journey.

"Ask him to come to my room when he is dressed."

John Dennis opened his desk, and out of it took an old book, bound in vellum, and clasped with a brazen clasp, of curious workmanship. He opened it with a sigh, placed it on a table near him, and waited for Jack—thinking.

"Well, dad," said the bold dragoon,

when their greetings were done, "what's the row?"

"A serious one, my boy."

"Something going wrong with the business, eh?" asked Jack, getting grave.

"No; the business is all right, better than ever," said his father.

Then it flashed upon his son what it must be. No one ill at home—nothing wrong with the business! Why, of course, there could be no doubt as to what it was—his father was going to marry again!

"Well, dad," (he was answering his own thoughts) "why not? You're a young man still, though you *are* a grandfather. Don't look so miserable about it. I shan't forbid the banns."

In spite of all his trouble, the squire could not help laughing at such an absurd mistake, and the laugh did him good. I am not sure whether a good laugh is not as efficacious as a good cry, for clearing the mind.

"No, Jack, I'm not going to marry, and

if you were to guess till Doomsday, you would never get within a hundred miles of the truth, so don't let us waste time."

"I am all attention, dad. Fire away."

"Ours is a very old family, Jack. We have an old house, and old plate, and many other old things, amongst them that inscription over the mantelpiece in the dining-room. Do you remember it, my son?"

"Of course I do—

'*Lette Desmond for Denys go through,
And Denys for Desmond be true,
Aoe Desmond or Denys will rue,*'

that's it."

"Good boy! word for word! Well, there is something else in the family older even than that—a *secret*, Jack—a secret which we have kept for over two hundred years, and which we are bound in honour to keep, until we are relieved of it by one having the right to do so."

"Well, dad, why shouldn't we keep it? It seems quiet enough. We've got on pretty smoothly with it for two centuries.

If you don't mind it, *I* don't. I don't see why either of us should worry over something that happened before our great-great-great-grandfathers were born. Keep the secret, dad, and when it comes to my turn, I'll keep it. It won't bother me. It won't occupy the best bed-room, or waste the '42 Lafitte, or catch the measles when the house is full of company. I rather enjoy the notion of family secrets; they are like family portraits—surround you with the odour of respectability, and cost nothing to keep."

"You shall learn presently, my boy, what this secret cost us to keep," said his father.

"Then there is something really serious the matter?"

"Yes, Jack, there is, and it touches our honour."

"That is safe in your hands, sir. Whatever you say or do, I'll stand up for—it's sure to be right. I could not help you, much, to decide what to do, but if I can take any trouble off your hands, or relieve

"Get rid of your mind of any anxiety, you've only to say the word, and it's done."

"You're a fine fellow, Jack!" replied his father, proudly. "Thank you for your confidence. I think I have deserved it, for the 'row,' as you call it, is over, and there is nothing for you to do except to grin and bear the consequences."

"I'm glàd I'm out of it," said the imperturbable dragoon. "I can do my share of the grinning and bearing, but I'm not so sure about the other part, if it's the sort of row I suspect."

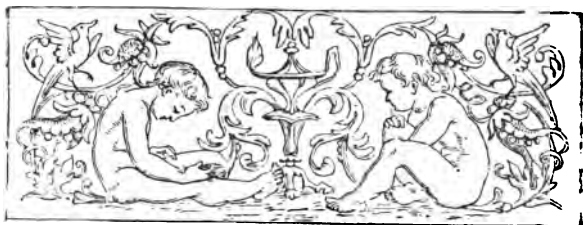
"What do you suspect?"

"That this old secret, which we are bound in honour to keep, has leaked out somehow, and you've got to buy up somebody who knows it."

"You are burning; I will not keep you longer in suspense. Take this book" (giving him the vellum volume, with the brazen clasp), "it contains the history of our secret. Here, where I place a marker, is where you should begin to read."

mind, for the present, the detached papers which are pasted in at the commencement. Read from where I have marked, carefully, and when you have finished, call me, and I will tell you all that remains to be told."

So saying, John Dennis left the room, and his son began to read the history of the Secret, which had been kept for two hundred and fifty years—read it, as no Dennis had ever yet read it before—out of the presence of Death, or the shadow of a newly-made grave.



CHAPTER XIX.

THE TRUST, ACCORDING TO JOHN DENNIS.



THE pages marked by John Dennis in the old vellum book were written in a small, clear hand, and headed thus:—

“This statement is compiled from the papers signed Gregory Denys, Martha Denys, and Charles Willford, which will be found elsewhere, for the benefit of my grandson, who, in the ordinary course of nature, will be charged with our Trust at an early age, and need some guide for their proper interpretation.”

Then follows much with which the reader

is already acquainted, as it epitomised the life of Hugh Desmond as narrated in the First Book of this history. It told how he had rescued Martha Denys from trial (or, rather, drowning) as a witch, of his persecution by Willford, the witch-finder, and his faithful services thereunder ; how, after the murder of his wife, and abduction of their son, he had entrusted her with the casket of the three keys ; how this had been removed from the ruins of the old brewhouse ; how he allowed it to be supposed that he had perished amongst those ruins, and how Willford had attempted to obtain possession of his property ; how he set sail for the New World, to seek his son ; and how his will and other papers, entrusted to Martin Earle, the goldsmith, had been stolen on the very day of his departure ; and then it went on to show what followed.

“Gregory Denys accompanied Desmond to New Caledonia, where their fears were realized. The expedition with which little Hugh was supposed to be, finding the colony

it had gone to join rescued, broke up and scattered. Part went to the West Indian Islands, and part—having touched at New York—went on to Virginia. They found that the boy had really been of the company, and was well when it dissolved; but which way he was taken afterwards they could not ascertain. Desmond followed one of the ships to St. Croix, and Gregory returned to England. Only one letter was received from him between this time and the year 1615, when Willford appeared with a Royal Deed of Grant, and took possession of the lands now known as the Grange, Hallowfield, and King's Morton estates. Gregory had no power to resist him, but waited, hoping against hope that his master would come back and foil the rascal, as he had done before.

“Nine years passed, and then Charles, the son of Stephen Willford, came to Gregory with the confession pasted on page 28, made and signed by his father upon his death-bed. As the writing of this confes-

sion is difficult to decipher, and is in some places almost faded out, I will give you a copy here, in plain English :—

“ ‘I praise God that he has brought me to a frame of mind in which I do not fear to confess a deadly sin, and desire to make atonement therefore as much as is possible in this world. It was I who robbed Martin Earle of the will and papers entrusted to him by Hugh Desmond. I took them to be the better able to identify and claim his property under a process which I had instituted when he seemed to have died some months before. I had a presentiment that he would never return from his far-off voyage. For my purpose, I gained the ear of a ’prentice lad, one John Eastman, and persuaded him that this Desmond was in a plot against the King’s Majesty, and that the papers he left in his master’s charge would, if found, cost the goldsmith his head. So he let me into the house on the day Desmond sailed for America, and all else had gone to wish him God speed. This

'prentice, when first I met him, was dissatisfied with his master, angry with his fellow-'prentice, and seemed an easy tool; but the old man had spoken him kindly that morning as he went out, and, when all seemed won, he withstood me. I call heaven to witness that I did not seek his life. I struck him in my anger, and as he fell his head came against a corner of the iron chest in which the papers were, and he died. I dragged his body to the yard, and buried it—oh! with what labour and remorse—under a great stone, and had only time to secure the plunder, and leave signs that it was the work of a common thief, and fly, before they returned. Afterwards I hardened my heart. I had not intended to kill the lad; I was doing Desmond no wrong, for he was surely dead now, and had not found his son. I doubted much if there was a living son to find; for he had fallen into hands that would spare not, and the ship which took his sister to Italy was wrecked. So I got a grant of the estates,

destroyed the will which indicated what and where they were, and prospered. But the hand of death is on me now, and I see my sin. I charge thee, my son, who wrote this, to make restitution—to Desmond if he be living, or to his kin if he be dead—as you value the repose of my miserable soul, and hope for mercy yourself when you are as I am now. When I am buried, bid thee to Manchester, and seek out one Gregory Denys, an honest man, and true to Desmond. He will tell thee all that may be known about him, and aid thee to do *my will.*'

"To this confession he signed his name, and it was brought to our ancestor, a poor smith, John, but an honour to our race, and the founder of its fortunes.

"Charles Willford was true to his trust. He followed Hugh Desmond to America, and hunted for him through all the colonies, braving dangers and privations which are partly recounted in his letters. When he died, Gregory, by arrangement between

them, made before he left, took possession of the lands, and they have remained in our family ever since.

“So you see that we are not masters of the Grange and the Staffordshire estates, as all the world believes; but only caretakers of them for the heir of Hugh Desmond, to whom we owe most of the land we really possess; for when he entrusted the casket to Martha Denys, he gave her the deeds of our Manchester property and that at Tiffield Brook for herself and her son. He made our fortunes, and we should be curs indeed if we ever forgot it.

“My dear boy, the oath which Martha Denys swore is a very solemn one. Wiser heads than yours or mine have held that it must be kept sacred. *‘May God so deal with me and mine, as I and they—with knowledge of my oath—deal with thee and thine, so long as there may be a Denys to serve and a Desmond who needs our service’*—are no light words.

“You will read on pages 97, 109, and

300, how some of our ancestors have discussed their position. I agree with Cyril Dennis, that sufficient trouble was not taken to find Desmond's daughter (who was saved from the wreck, as is well proved, for Martha Denys was with her, and came back safe). Too much faith was pinned upon finding Desmond or his son, until all clue to the other child was lost. I also agree with David (a conscientious man, and a great lawyer, as appears by his works, which you will find in the library), that, Desmond's will having been destroyed, we must go back to his instructions to Martha Denys, and account to the holder of the keys as he bade her—if ever they are presented. But this was written many years ago, and the longer the time that passes, the greater should be our caution.

“Desmond gave one key to his daughter before she went to Italy ; the second fell into Willford's hands by accident, and he took the third with him. He might have found his son, and given him that third

key as a token (for Gregory had written—see page 41—that the will had been destroyed, and he might have received the letter). On the other hand, he might have lost that key, or had it stolen from him ; and the same with regard to the others. So that if these are ever presented, we must not take them as evidence of a gift, as Desmond intended, but enquire carefully into how they were come by. They may be presented to us. We have all had presentiments that they will. Be not you the first to think differently. Stranger things have come to pass.

“ David’s other notes are worthy of respect. ‘If the keys never be brought back,’ he writes, ‘still if one doth prove that he is the right heir of Hugh Desmond, we must needs admit him ; for although the delivery to a stranger, for good consideration, of the key of a chest containing deeds be a good delivery thereof, and consequently of the land to which they pertain, this ousteth not the right of the heir, who takes by in-

heritance, no such delivery having been made.'

"Lastly—remember this. ON NO ACCOUNT WHATEVER is this Trust to be made known, save by the head of the family to his successor, or to a recognised Desmond. Before your poor father's corpse, I prayed that I might be spared until you were of an age to understand it; and you will now remember that I have often impressed upon you how sacred to us—first as Christians, and next as gentlemen—is an obligation which rests upon our honour. I was preparing you for this—not in vain, as your conduct on several occasions has proved. Act as my private papers will show you I have acted by the properties in question, and my blessing and God's blessing go with you."

Thus ended the retrospect made by old John Dennis, and read by the father of its present reader, when he stood all alone in the world, a boy of seventeen.

So absorbed was Jack in the narrative, that he did not notice when his father came in (John Dennis stayed away until the temptation to *see* how Jack was taking it became too strong), and when he had finished, and threw up his eyes in wonder, there his father stood, watching him.

"Wonderful!" he exclaimed. "Why, dad, it would make a novel, only I don't see where the trouble comes in."

"Sir Stephen Willford, aided by an American lawyer, has made a claim for the Staffordshire estates," replied Dennis.

"Don't he wish he may get them! What has he to do with it?"

"His lawyer has an old letter from Gregory Denys to Charles Willford, in which he writes of a Trust, and an oath to keep it, and this, coupled with other facts they have dug out of our history, is the foundation of a pretence that we hold this land for the Willfords."

"What insolence!"

"They have much to show for it, Jack;

they have that Royal Grant ; they have that letter, and those facts—all true in effect, but false by application ; they have what Saxon says would make a Court of Equity put me on my defence.”

“ Well, what then ? We have a good one,” said Jack.

“ You forget. Turn to the first lines of old John Dennis’ last paragraph. *On no account whatever* is our Trust to be made known, save by the head of the family to his successor, or to a recognised Desmond. My mouth is sealed, Jack, my hands are tied ; I cannot defend myself.”

“ But, surely,” Jack argued, “ such a fix as this was not foreseen. It seems to me, dad, that our first duty is to stick up for the estates, and if we can’t do so according to rule, we must do so *somehow*. Of the two evils—licking Sir Stephen is not the greatest—don’t you think so, dad ?”

“ That would entail publicity, and publicity, litigation. Scores of spurious Desmonds would appear ; we should have no

peace ; we should be harrassed by actions and suits, and slowly bled to death by lawyers' costs. No, my boy, there's no fighting to be done ; but there is a third evil—a little bit less than the other two—and that I've accepted. I have promised to buy Sir Stephen out, Jack."

"Whew ! That'll cost money."

"The full value of the estates. They bring in about eighteen thousand a year. This at (let us say) twenty years purchase, would represent a capital sum of three hundred and sixty thousand pounds. I think that by selling this house, and the Manchester business, and giving, in part payment, my shares in the Tiffeld Brook Works, I can just make it up. But this is ruin, Jack."

"My God ! yes."

"For myself I don't care, and you are pretty well provided for, under your mother's marriage settlement. It comes hardest upon poor Grace. I must have a home for Grace."

"You'll have the Grange, surely, when you've paid its value?"

"To live in," John Dennis answered, with a smile; "but where is the bread and mutton to come from? Every shilling of rent and profit must go into the trust fund. Will you do something for your sister, Jack?" he asked, in a husky voice, and with wistful eyes.

"No, sir," Jack replied, with decision, "I will not; but I'll do everything for *you*. I'll sell the things in settlement: I'll sell my commission; I'll sell the coat off my back, and go to work in my shirtsleeves in the Manchester factory for thirty shillings a week, sooner than have no share in this. Dad, I, thought I loved and respected you up to the hilt already, but, by heavens! I'd rather be Jack Dennis than a duke, this day!"

It was some time before either of them spoke again.

"I only want a few hundreds for Grace, till I get on my legs again," said John

Dennis, putting away his handkerchief ;
“ I’ll make it up if I live, Jack, never fear.
I’ll manage Hallowfield myself now, and
that will help. Why shouldn’t I pay my-
self, instead of some one else, if I can do
the work as well ?”

“ Good job Gerty is provided for,” said
Jack. “ We must get some decent young
fellow with lots of tin, for Grace.”

“ I rather fancy that she has got a young
fellow for herself, but I don’t know about
the ‘ tin,’ said his father, with the first
smile that had lit his face for a few days.

“ Who is he, dad ?”

“ His name is D’Esmonde (D, apostrophe,
and an e at the end). Do you know, Jack,
I once had a dim sort of idea that he was
the man we want, but I sounded him, and
his sister also—I even showed her the
casket—but they know nothing, seek no-
thing.”

“ Where do they come from ?”

“ From the United States.”

“ Oh, Lord ! Yankees !” exclaimed the

bold dragoon. "That won't do for Grace."

"Wait till you see them," replied his father.

Grace had come up for the season, and banished brown holland from the London house for about a month, at this crisis, and the D'Esmondés (who had taken up their quarters in a huge hotel, conducted upon American principles), were again welcome guests. Her father was right, she had got that young fellow for herself; but whether he had gotten her, was a question yet to be asked, and he funké it, for he was a shy, proud man, this D'Esmonde.

"They will be prejudiced against me, because I'm an American," he fretted, "and think I'm after her money."

Nevertheless, he took great interest in Miss Dennis' movements, and she—innocent as a daisy!—let out when she usually rode in the park, what days she sketched at South Kensington, and so on, and soon ceased to be surprised at finding George

loafing about in the vicinity. Then, he had to call for Fanny when she spent the morning in Eaton Square (which was about three times a week), so that they saw a good deal of each other.

"Now Jack's come," Grace told Fanny D'Esmonde, "he'll show your brother all sorts of sights, and introduce him to some young men. Dear papa's friends are all very nice, but just a wee bit fogie, don't you think?"

It may be that Jack, not having heart for gaiety, neglected to keep his sister's promise, or, perhaps George preferred fogies. Be this as it may, things went on pretty much the same as before, except that papa became very busy—more busy than Grace had ever known him to be.

There were busy people at the Grange, also—surveyors, two sets of them (one for the land and houses, and one for the coal)—and all employed by John Dennis, who placed his house at their disposal, as the

inn at King's Morton was not renowned. To his great surprise, Percy Tremayne found himself requested to assist in the valuation of the land.

"I don't forget that you are not a surveyor," Dennis wrote, "but you know every yard of the place, and its worth, as a farmer. You look after rents and crops, and the other fellow will do the trigonometry."

So just when Percy had promised himself a little quiet, and perhaps a run up to town after the bustle and worry of getting Warnstead ready for Sir Stephen, who spent his Easter there, he was put in harness again.

The lady (presumptive) of the Manor also spent her Easter in the country with her family. She could afford to be "good." How sweetly she begged papa's and mamma's pardon, and how nice she was to Mary—need not be told. How she went over Warnstead, duly protested, and shyly suggested dull amber silk for this room, and blue satin for that, was noted by the young

man from Jackson and Grahams in a big book, but for the present does not concern us. It may however be interesting to state that Percy beheld all this without the faintest quiver of jealousy or heart-ache. Bessie affected to ignore that he had ever loved her ; treated him as a dear old friend with whom flirtation was impossible, and the better she played her part, the more thoroughly he despised her.

When the survey began, the baronet and his right hand man, Mr. Alexander, returned to Warnstead, and was most hospitable to the surveyors—out of respect for his worthy neighbour. Acting upon the same kindly motive, he praised the condition of the fields, vaunted the extent and good quality of the coal, and the rising importance of King's Morton. "I shouldn't wonder if he's going to sell some of it," he remarked. "Hope he'll get a good long price." The festivities at which these eulogies were repeated somewhat retarded the surveyors' work, but put three

out of the four into an excellent humour with their entertainer — with themselves, and with the property they surveyed.

The fourth (Percy) was in a fidget to get the business done and over. Count Tasti had called on his mother, and shown her her own letter with quite a collection of foreign postage stamps upon the envelope, as a palpable excuse for his silence. It had missed him at Milan, followed him to Vienna, Berlin, Paris, and eventually ran him to earth in London. He was delighted to renew their acquaintance (without the slightest hint at the starvation days when it was begun), and was her most humble servant to command.

“He knows all about our family,” Mrs. Tremayne wrote; “and has promised to bring me our pedigree, which he had made out when he was trying to persuade my father to petition for the restoration of some property in Venice, which the Austrians had confiscated. He says I am not the first of my race who married an English-

man, for that I am the direct descendant of a Ribolini who eloped with a British buccaneer. There's a romance for you ! He knows nothing about the key, which he hears of now for the first time from me ; but has promised to enquire amongst some old people and servants, and pick up the clue for us if there be one. George Desmond and his sister drove over on Saturday. She was looking very well, and as bright as a bee. Won't the corn grow of itself, and the beasts eat and drink without you for a day or two ? I should like you to see Count Tasti, if only to thank him for the trouble he is taking. Fanny seems to have made a great friend of Miss Dennis ; do you know her brother ? He is in town I hear, &c., &c., &c."

Percy had never seen Captain Dennis. Beyond the "card case," and a few domestic comments made at the Grange on the absent son and brother, he had never heard of him ; but no sooner had he re-read his mother's letter than he began to envy, hate

and malign this promising young officer and unoffending gentleman in a most unchristian manner. And all because Fanny Desmond had made a great friend of Grace Dennis, and the good-looking dragoon (he had been shown his photograph) was her brother! What a pull these idle butterflies have over us working bees—he thought. Here's this one fluttering about the park and enjoying himself right and left, whilst I am taking stock of sheep and measuring muck heaps! And that sister of his! Of course she'll be getting Fanny invitations to balls where he will meet her, and tickets for flower shows where they'll walk together; and be backing him up in every way!

So Fanny had visited his mother and seen her home on Father Thames in all its spring-tide dress. He could shut his eyes and picture her moving about over the emerald velvet lawn with her southern swing—as bright as a bee and as graceful as an antelope—revelling in the beauties nature spread before her, and reflecting

them back from the mirror of her delighted face as the river reflected the sky. He was glad that Captain Dennis was not with her *there*.

The news about his pedigree and the key went in at one eye and out of the other; but his mother's last observation respecting Count Tasti struck him as a very proper one. He would make a point of running up to town for a few days as soon as the survey was over, to——to thank Count Tasti.

There has been very little love-making in these pages, but some very smart practice in this direction has been going on, so to speak, behind them, whilst the D'Esmondes were at the Grange.



CHAPTER XX.

VERY CONVINCING.

JOHNN DENNIS spent most of the time now in the city or at his solicitor's, learning the lesson which those who want to raise money all of a sudden have to go through—namely, that the holding value and the selling value of a thing are two vastly different quantities. This lesson had double application in his case, and gave him double anxiety. The sum to be paid Sir Stephen as the value of the Staffordshire estates would be calculated upon their value to hold; the other property upon which this

money was to be raised, was worth only its value to sell. The shares in the Tiffield Brook Works for example. To hold, they were away above par ; but throw half of them on the market, and down they all would go. Indeed "the mere fact of your going out of it," John Dennis was told, "will shake public confidence in the company for awhile. You must sell gradually, and wait." But wait he could not.

There was trouble also in disposing of the Manchester business. His partnership with Mr. Scott had three years to run, and the land was leased to it for that period. Mr. Scott would consider about dissolving by mutual consent, or buying Mr. Dennis out, if he would only be patient about it, and wait. But wait he could not, and to sell the land without the good-will of the business with which it was identified, would be a sacrifice indeed.

So affairs got more and more dismal as they were looked into, and those who had to be consulted wondered what on earth

John Dennis was about. "A fellow may want to get out of trade," said the hope of his stockbroker. "I can understand *that*, when he goes in for a title, but hang me if I'd chuck as Dennis is going to do!" For a report had got abroad that Mr. Dennis of the Grange was to be made a peer, and one journal was "permitted to announce that his title would be Baron Morton, of King's Morton." If it had been known that his son was going to "chuck" his commission in the army, the odour of a rodent might have been perceived in the air.

Yes; poor Jack's fortune would have to go. A sorry fortune enough for a bachelor captain; but a drop in the ocean to be levied. Still, it had to go, and his commission with it—and to go cheap, for the regiment was in orders (out of its turn) for India.

So the surveyors went on finding out how good and valuable was the property to be redeemed; and the means of redemption shrunk, until it became clear that total ruin stared John Dennis in the face.

He never quailed, he never repined ; and Jack, his son, backed him up in bank parlours and stock-brokers' offices, listening demurely to a lot of talk he could not make head or tail of, just for the chance of pressing poor old dad's hand under the table now and then, and letting them see "it was all right you, know."

From unsuspecting Grace came the stabs. She—lady of the house, and manageress-in-chief of its hospitalities—wanted to know when he would give his dinners, and what night she should fix for the first ball; "because, dear papa, you know," she urged, "that unless we get the invitations out soon, all the nice people will be engaged."

He had not the heart to tell her there would be no more balls for her, and that the fine old family plate which had so often graced his board must go to the silversmith, or there would be no dinner for themselves before the season was out. Well, he was keeping the Trust ; he was doing as Duty bade, and—

“Ever following her commands,
On, with toil of heart and knees and hands,
Thro’ the long gorge, to the far light had won
His path upward, and prevailed.”

And already caught some glimpse of “the
shining table-lands” above the—

“Toppling crags of Duty scaled,
To which our God himself is moon and sun.”

One day, when he had come home unusually jaded and weary in body, and sick at heart—for Jack, occupied with other business in his interests, had not been with him, and things were looking their blackest—he was told that a lady and gentleman were in the drawing-room waiting to see him. He had just flung himself heavily into his easy chair, and was in no humour to entertain visitors. Was not Miss Grace at home?

Miss Grace was, and had ordered that these cards were to be taken to him as soon as he came in.

Upon these cards was engraved—

"MRS. TREMAYNE,

"The Willows, Kingston-on-Thames."

"LE CONTI TASTI."

Had they been waiting long?

Nearly an hour.

"Young Tremayne's mother, I suppose," he said to himself, as he went down; "come to thank me for giving her boy a lift. I wish she hadn't."

But what did the little stout man, with short white hair and beard, and buttoned up so tight, with a red and green ribbon on the lapel of his coat, whom he found with her and Grace—what did he want?

"I hope I have not disturbed you, Mr. Dennis," the lady began, when Grace had introduced both visitors, "especially as my only excuse is such a bad one."

At any other time he would have replied that *any* excuse which gave him the pleasure of her acquaintance would be a good one; but now such little courtesies hung

fire. He simply bowed, and this brought her to the point.

"In one word, my excuse is curiosity. I am told that you can enlighten me on a matter which has been puzzling me for a long time ; and as my son cannot get away from his employment to do so for me, I have ventured to call upon you myself, and ask you what is the meaning of this ?"

So saying, she placed in his hand a gold key, the haft whereof was fashioned like a heart, entwined with forget-me-nots.

Had it been red hot, the start that John Dennis gave might have been accounted for.

"May I ask you one or two questions before I answer yours?" he said, as soon as he could catch his breath again.

"Oh, certainly ! Give and take is only fair."

"In the first place, who told you I could give you any information about this curious key ?"

"If you will permit me," Count Tasti

interposed, in excellent English, "I will reply, as it is on account of investigations made by me that madame is here. I was informed by a very old man—a countryman of my own, named Fabri, living in Dean Street, Soho—that no one would probably know more of the Desmond family than a Mr. Dennis (*he* called the name Denys), who once lived in Deansgate, Manchester. I went to Deansgate, Manchester, and found that you, sir, are the head of the house of which he spoke."

"That only leads to a further question," replied Dennis, with something like his old smile. "What has the Desmond family to do with this key?"

"This," said the count. "Many years ago, I had the honour of being intimate with this lady's father, who was then an exile. Italy was not a kingdom then, and some of her noblest sons were—were as my good friend. When our prospects brightened, I tried to induce him to claim certain estates long confiscated, and for this purpose I had

his pedigree made out—a long affair, very long; for, as his claim would have to be made through a daughter of the house of Ribolini, which is now extinct, we had to trace back his line to theirs. Do I make myself understood?”

“Go on,” Dennis replied, almost in a whisper.

“We traced it back to a Maria de Ribolini, who married an Englishman, named Desmond, and was murdered in his stead by some of her kinsmen, who followed them to this country for revenge. You will think that this has nothing to do with the curious key; but, with your patience, I think I can show you that it may have.”

“Proceed in your own way, Count. I assure you I am all attention.”

“Many thanks. After the death of this poor Maria, her only child* was brought back to Venice, and from a list of family jewels made out years afterwards, and which fell into the hands of the expert who

* The worthy Count makes a mistake here.

drew up the pedigree I have mentioned, it appears that this key was hers. Now, the fact of an object possessing no very great value, except as a work of art, being included amongst the diamonds and other precious trinkets she obtained by marriage, seems to show that it may have a history. Does it not strike you so ?”

“It may have a history,” echoed John Dennis. “Yes, it may have a very strange history.”

“Good. It may also be that its history is bound up in some way with that of the Desmonds, as it was brought from England. If, therefore, the old Fabri (whose father and grandfather were born and died in the service of this lady’s ancestors) be correct in saying that you are well-informed about Desmond, we hoped you might be able to tell us something about the key. Is your question answered, Mr. Dennis ?”

“It is ; and also in part one which would have followed—namely, What makes you think that your key has a history ? Have

you any other reason than that you have just stated ?”

“Only this,” Mrs. Tremayne replied. “My father prized it much. At the time Count Tasti has mentioned, we were often in want of bread ; but he would not part with it, and conjured me never to do so. There is something else which strikes me as curious, only I am hardly at liberty to mention it at present.”

“I will not force your confidence,” said John Dennis, with suppressed emotion. “I have only one more query. Is the pedigree Count Tasti spoke of in existence ?”

“I have it here,” said the Count, tapping his breast. “I bring it from our Legation, where it was finished to-day for madame ; but there is nothing in it that helps us.”

“Will you trust me sufficiently to let me judge for myself ?”

“Perfectly, with madam’s permission.”

“I really must apologize for taking up so much of your time,” she said. “We did not dream of going into all these private

matters, which cannot interest you ; but as you asked——”

“I accept with pleasure all the consequences of my inquisitiveness,” said Dennis ; “and I have listened to the Count’s statement with the deepest interest. My dear Mrs. Tremayne, this is no *façon de parler*, I assure you. That key *has* a history, which I may—God grant I may !—be able to tell you. But bear with me a little—I have been much agitated to-day.”

“And we have bored you ! I am so sorry.”

“I shall look over some old papers, and—and—come again this time to-morrow,” he broke off ; “and leave me this,” touching the parchment, which had been drawn out from under Count Tasti’s red and green ribbon.

“Did it not strike you that our friend’s manner was a little odd ?” Percy’s mother inquired of the Count, when they were seated in her carriage. “He was barely

civil at first, and how excited he got at the end !”

“It is the privilege of his estimable countrymen to be eccentric, my dear madam,” said Tasti, shrugging his shoulders.

“Brooks’!” shouted John Dennis through the trap of a Hansom he hailed before his late visitors were well out of sight; “and half-a-crown if you get there before half-past six.”

Half-past six was Mr. Saxon’s regular hour for dining at his club when in town. It wanted five minutes of that interesting hour when John Dennis swooped upon him like a kite upon its prey, and bore him away to a deserted card-room.

“Now,” he panted, “look over this” (spreading a parchment upon the table), “and tell me if it’s all right.”

“It’s a pedigree,” observed the Q.C.

“Of course! I know that; but is it correct? Read it, and see.”

"My dear fellow, how can I possibly say if it is correct, if I read it a dozen times! It begins with one Oscar de Ribolini, and it ends with one Percy Tremayne; and I dare say it contains the births, marriages, and deaths of a number of people utterly unknown to me. For example, how can I tell that Cosmo de Ribolini really married Marcellina Bossio, August 23, 1611, and had issue three sons—Hugo, Carlos, and Francisco—and one daughter, Maria?"

"It's proved—it's proved, Saxon! by the pedigree," Dennis cried, slapping the parchment.

"Then why ask me if it is correct?"

"I mean is it correct in form—is it what the law calls evidence? Answer me that."

"It depends. If it comes out of proper custody, is supported, and not contradicted, it may be."

The joyful countenance of Dennis fell.

"Only may be!" he moaned. "What cursed quibbling!"

"Now do just consider. If I get some

sheep-skin and seals, and write down that the Emperor of China married my grandmother, and had issue Hugo, Carlos, and Spencer Saxon—is that to bind anybody?"

"But this is certified by a judge, who states distinctly he had the proofs before him. Now, *do* attend. You read Italian, I know. Here's his signature and his seal, dated 1847; and it is attested by the Sardinian Minister. Don't that make it good?"

"Let me see. Yes, you are right. Why didn't you show me that at once, instead of wanting to know if all this marrying and burying be correct? You are brimming over with mysteries, Dennis, and my dinner is being spoiled."

"Oh! never mind your dinner. If you only knew what this is to me!" exclaimed Dennis.

"Come and share my lamb cutlets?"

"I'll not taste food till I am sure this is authentic!" slapping the pedigree.

"Then go, my dear fellow, to the Italian

Legation, hunt up the Minister or a secretary, and ask; only wait till they have had their dinners."

"Bravo! I never thought of that."

"Of their dinners?"

"No, no; how you worry! It isn't kind, Saxon, when you see—but these last entries" (returning to the pedigree), "they are English. 'Helena de Cravalli married Percy Tremayne, at the parish church of Greenwich, and their boy was born in London.' That can be confirmed any day."

"Fee one shilling to the clerks," said Saxon. "But my lamb cutlets——"

"'May good digestion wait on appetite, and health on both,'" quoted Dennis, wringing his hand. "I'm off."

"Without expounding the mystery?"

"Yes; I have too much respect for your lamb cutlets."

Away he went to hunt up the Minister. The Chancellerie was closed for the day. Where did his Excellency live? No. 10, Westbourne Park Gardens.

Away he went (the vixenest chestnut screw in that Hansom long remembered the day) to Westbourne Park Gardens. Was the Minister at home? His Excellency had just gone out to dinner. Could the Secretary of Legation be found? Well, he sometimes went to the St. James's Club about that time.

Away bowled the Hansom to Piccadilly, and there, on the steps—as good luck would have it—stood the secretary, with a cigarette in his mouth, and his lorgnette in his hand, killing time until it would be proper to appear at the Opera.

In a quarter of an hour afterwards, away went John Dennis again—this time to a telegram office, where he wrote the following message :—

“To Percy Tremayne, Esq.,

“Warnstead, King's Morton.

“Stop the survey, and come to me instantly.

“John Dennis.”

But Percy never got that message. He had left Warnstead ten hours before it was delivered, and it fell into other hands. There had been trouble at Warnstead—a terrible quarrel between the cousins—out of which Sir Stephen emerged with a well-defined black eye. Percy had knocked him down and left the house, late as it was.

No one, except Alexander, knew what it was all about. It began in Percy's bedroom, whither the baronet had followed him, after a very noisy dinner party to the surveyors, and with a good deal of Champagne and Burgundy under his belt. Perhaps these fell out amongst themselves; for Burgundy is hot-headed, and the "glorious vintage" brooks no rival near its throne. Anyhow, the baronet gave them the blame. He had taken too much, and stumbled against the bed-post—"that was all," he stammered.

"But Tremayne has left the house!" cried his angry master.

"Good job too, d——d upstart! Can

get a better fellow for half the money," quoth the Burgundy.

"I believe he knocked you down. What is the matter with your eye?"

"Hit it against the bed-post," lied the Champagne.

"Bah! Don't play the fool with me. I believe he knocked you down—I hope he did. Do you know what happens to a man who slaps another in my country? He gets killed."

"We have none of that infernal nonsense here," said the baronet with blue lips, "and so I tell you. I'm not going to fight that fellow—a fellow no better than my servant."

"You white-livered skunk! You're not fit to black his shoes." Alexander almost spat the words at him.

"If you talk like that you can walk out after him."

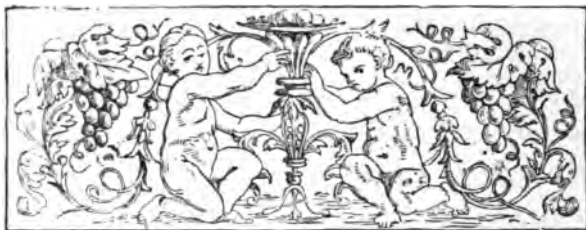
"Can I?" Alexander replied between his teeth. "Then I'll know beforehand what he walked out for. Now" (striding up to Sir Stephen, and seizing him by the

throat with a boney clutch, not to be escaped), "now then! Tell me why he 'walked out'—the whole truth—or I'll shake the life out of you."

And he let him have a sample of what the threatened operation would be like; by way of encouragement.

King's Morton was not going to be put out of its jog-trot ways even by telegrams. John Dennis' message was delivered at Warnstead just about the time when Percy (who had passed the night at the station inn) took his seat in the London train. It fell into Alexander's hands, who felt no scruple about opening it.

"*Stop the survey!*" he exclaimed. "What is the matter now?" What tricks were being played, and he absent? This would not do at all. He packed up his bag, ordered a carriage, and leaving the baronet to sleep off his "drunk" and develop his black eye, started for town, to have it out with Dennis.



CHAPTER XXI.

THE FRUITS OF IT.



UDGE ALEXANDER found the man he was going "to have it out" with in good company, and was not sorry for it. The velvet glove had been tried, and now it was time to see what the iron hand would do. He found John Dennis in his drawing-room, where Mrs. Tremayne and Percy, George and Fanny D'Esmonde, and Saxon, Q.C., were assembled, and in a voice loud enough for all to hear, asked—

"Now, Mr. Dennis, what is this I hear about your stopping the survey?"

"Perhaps I had better answer that question," said George D'Esmonde coming forward. "Shall I, Percy?"

"I treat only with principals, sir," replied Alexander in his loftiest tones.

"That is precisely the reason why you should treat with Mr. Tremayne and your humble servant," George replied.

"Ha! I see your game. Well then, let me tell you that if anyone has advised Mr. Dennis that he can shunt his liability to us by a bogus transfer to you—he's made a mighty big mistake."

"The estates to which you refer, Mr. Alexander, were not his to transfer," replied George.

"We know that," (with a scoff) "and as he chooses to play fast and loose with us, others shall know it too. He got those estates as trustee for Sir Stephen Willford, and kept them from him by fraud."

"No, sir," replied D'Esmonde. "He got them as trustee of the heirs of Hugh Desmond and kept them *for* us, like the high-souled gentleman he is."

Had Percy and George rehearsed it ten times over, they could not have done it half so well, for it was spontaneous. They walked up to where John Dennis stood, and each took and pressed a hand.

"May one venture to inquire," asked Alexander somewhat subdued, and therefore lapsing into elegance of diction, "who are included in the word 'us'?"

"Mrs. Tremayne and myself," George replied.

"Then perhaps one of you will kindly enlighten me as to who this Hugh Desmond was, and what interest he possessed in the estates granted by King James the First to Stephen Willford."

"That sir is our own private affair," D'Esmonde answered him stiffly.

"Look here, George," interposed John Dennis. "Mr. Alexander has acted fairly and kindly in this matter. I think he ought to be told. *You* can tell him. He stood between me and a litigation which would have been disastrous to us all. He

thought he could convince me I was in the wrong. Why not convince him now that I was not?"

"Your wish is my law," replied George.

"And ours," said Percy.

"We leave him in your hands, sir; convince him yourself."

"You forget the obligation, my boys."

"So particular, when it is all over. Well, Percy, bring along the book, and we'll do the convincing for ourselves," said George D'Esmonde.

Whilst the three are going over the strange eventful history recorded in the vellum book, the reader must be told how they became entitled to use it.

The pedigree left with John Dennis by Mrs. Tremayne established her status as the heiress-at-law of Hugh Desmond so conclusively, that the trustee could tell her the history of the golden key, and when the silver one was mentioned mother and son exclaimed in a breath—" *George D'Esmonde has it !*"

George was sent for, and (without being told why or wherefore) was asked to tell *its* history. Now we know that he did not like to talk to strangers about this key ; but the assurances given him that no idle curiosity prompted the request, and the manner of Dennis (whom he had excellent reasons just now for propitiating) in giving them, unloosed his tongue, and he told the tale. Told it, not as he had done before in the twilight at the "Willows," but with all its names, dates, and particulars. The man who was found dying in that hut was no other than Hugh Desmond, and he lived long enough to narrate his own story, and to hear that of his son. The young man remembered well having been carried away from his home when he was a child by a strange man on a horse, and put on board a ship, where he was kindly treated by a woman who had lately lost her boy of about his age. A justice of the peace was sent for, and all this was taken down in writing. Did this

Hugh Desmond say anything about the key? Yes, he bade his son keep it carefully ; and, as he was much exhausted, put off further conversation till the morrow—which never came. He passed away in his sleep.

“So you know nothing as to what it means?” asked Dennis.

“Absolutely nothing. My people have attached some superstitious value to it. That is all,” George answered him.

“On account of that vision or dream?”

“I suppose so. One may respect old traditions without believing in them,” he said carelessly.

Then they let him read the book.

Next, they talked it all over, and congratulated each other.

Lastly, consternation fell upon them.

If George D’Esmonde was the heir-at-law of Desmond’s son—and there was no doubt of this—Mrs. Tremayne, as heiress-at-law of his daughter, was portionless ! And this, although but for her George

would never have got a clue to his rights !
Terribly hard, this, on Mrs. Tremayne.

So they sent for Spencer Saxon, and had it all over again for the third time. The Q.C., after having assured them that nothing short of an Act of Parliament would put them to rights, proceeded to recommend what George had already made up his mind to do, *i.e.*, to share and share alike, for, he argued, the fact that Desmond gave one key to each child (the third being put out of court by his last words to Martha Denys, "Beware the hand which holds the iron key!"), may fairly be taken to show what was the disposition made in his will.

"And if they do this," said Dennis, more as a statement than a question, "they're safe."

"I think," replied the cautious Q.C., "that if they don't quarrel amongst themselves, and hold their tongues, they will be as safe as—as they can be."

"Now, Mr. Alexander," said George

Desmond, closing the book of the Trust, "you see how all your premises were right, and all your conclusions wrong. We all think that you deserve immense credit for the way you worked your case out, and we leave you to form your own estimate of that noble man" (pointing to John Dennis) "who was about to sacrifice his fortune sooner than betray the secret of his house."

"Sentiment, sir, sentiment!" was the sneering reply. "Sir Stephen is not to be won over by fine words. How do we know but that this agreeable meeting has not been planned beforehand? I mistrust surprises, Mr. D'Esmonde. I will form my own estimate of Mr. Dennis very shortly." He drew a paper from his pocket-book as he spoke. "I have here," he said, aloud, "an agreement signed by Sir Stephen Willford and by John Dennis, in these words—

"Upon the case presented by H. Clay Alexander, on behalf of Sir Stephen Willford, Mr. Dennis will pay him a sum equal to the assessed value of the Grange, Hallow-

field, and King's Morton properties, in full discharge of all claims.'

"Did he know, when he wrote his name to this, that the heirs of Desmond were in existence? If he did not, then his promise was a binding one. If he did, he tried to play us a trick, and deserves no pity. And observe, if you please, he does not bind himself to give up those estates, or even to redeem them. He agrees to pay us a sum *equal to their assessed value*, and this for a good consideration. Ah! you are listening to me, Mr. Saxon, I am glad of that. *For a good consideration*, I repeat, to avoid litigation, which he could not meet without breaking the traditions of his family, which—to use his own words—would be *disastrous*. What matters it in logic or morality that this pressure has been removed? I will grant, without prejudice, that it is removed. How does that alter our position? Why, it was his own proposition to give us money instead of the land! Had he arranged to make over the

estates, it might have been different. Did he think it a good compromise when he made it? That is the question. Did he mean to carry it out when he made it? What is he going to do now?"

"To your first question I reply, yes," said John Dennis. "To your second, yes; to your third, pay the money to the last shilling."

"That I will never allow," exclaimed George D'Esmonde, warmly.

"Or I." This came as warmly from Mrs. Tremayne.

"I am afraid," observed Saxon, taking a pinch of snuff, "that we shall differ on the subject of consideration."

"I will not be sheltered under any lawyer's quibble," said Dennis. "I did mean to pay the money, and have found means to do so. My signature has never been dishonoured yet, and never shall be."

"Are you in earnest?" Alexander asked, in a rather shaky voice.

The categorical replies to his concluding

questions had taken him aback, and what followed was lost upon him.

"In sober earnest. You have *convinced* me again, Mr. Alexander, and this time there will be no surprise," said Dennis.

"What a man ! what a man !" exclaimed the judge, throwing his long arms over his head with that gesture of scaring wasps we know of, and sinking on an ottoman.

A great struggle was going on within him. The veins of his forehead rose in large blue knots, and throbbed. He swayed to and fro, with his face buried in his hands. He stamped like a pettish child. He wanted to come out of this affair with something to say against John Dennis, and he could not. He wanted to let his admiration of that strict regard for honour—that almost sublime self-abnegation—have vent, and he could not. There was a fiend fighting with the wreck of an honest mind within him, and the contest was a fierce one—too fierce to last long.

"Listen, all of you !" he cried, starting

up, and looking as wild as we have ever seen him, "before the devil I have cast out takes unto himself fifty worse than he, and makes a villain of me again! Listen! I will not go against that man—no, not for an army of Willfords. For that Stephen? Never! He *did* cheat at cards; he confessed it when he had drunk himself honest the day we met last at Mr. Saxon's chambers. The wretched sot hiccoughed his delight at having '*done*'—that was his elegant word—having done John Dennis twice over. He tried to bribe Mr. Tremayne, the miserable, *stupid* ass! He attempted to play tricks with me—yes, with ME! He pretended that as he was to get money instead of lands, his bargain with me, for half of them, was off, and that he could pay me only what he pleased—the thief! I have done with him; I discard, I dispose, I will expose him. As for you" (turning to Dennis) "I give in. I am afraid of a man like you. If I were God, I'd strike blind an enemy such as I have

been to you ! Of course I knew that you were not bound to respect this rag " (tossing the agreement from him). " What was the basis of your promise ? ' The case presented by H. Clay Alexander.' Well, that case was a fraud ! Do you hear me ? a fraud ! *The woman who brought home Charles Willford's son had a husband living when he married her.*"

" Did your client know that ?" asked Saxon.

" Yes, he did, I told him in your clerk's room. That was why he consented to the compromise. Talk of dishonouring your signature !" (this to Dennis), " it is only dishonoured by being written within an inch of that scoundrel's ! Let others tell you how your honour is affected—I dare not say a word on that—but of this be sure, Stephen Willford shall stand branded as a sharper, a cheat, and a liar, if he ever troubles you on any other ground."

" Your superior friend has some good left

in him," observed Spencer Saxon, when the judge had retired.

"Poor man! yes," said Mrs. Tremayne, "he very nearly cried at the last; but where is Mr. Dennis?"

"I really believe he's gone down to shake hands with him," Percy replied.

"He is quite capable of doing so," was Saxon's comment, after another pinch. "I have not yet made up my mind which is the most unreasonable creature, and the finest fellow in this romance—Hugh Desmond in the beginning, or John Dennis at the end."

"I think the order of the names in the first line of the old legend should be changed," said George. "It is Denys who has gone *through* for Desmond."

"I like it best as it is, Mrs. Tremayne contended; "going *through*' only gives me an idea of physical assistance, but *true*! what a big little word 'true' is!"

At this point John Dennis re-appeared, looking shy.

The Tremaynes took their leave; and Fanny adjourned with Grace to be told something, and John Dennis wanted terribly to be alone, and think it all over and over and over—but George wouldn't let him. He fidgetted about the room, he turned over photographs he had seen fifty times before. He buttoned and unbuttoned his coat, till he half tore off the buttons. He set to work composing a speech, but no three consecutive words would stick together when he tried to repeat them. So he blurted it out anyhow. The insatiable fellow was not content with a moiety of eighteen thousand a year: he wanted something more. He wanted Grace. She had accepted him that morning under the Kensington Limes, "if papa did not object," and this was why the crafty creature was so willing to oblige "papa" by telling all about the silver key. Poor little Gracy had had a hard day of it—a proposal (for which she was not wholly unprepared), four first class surprises, and a glimpse at the

old Mr. Alexander—were enough to try stouter nerves, but all's well that ends well.

Jack came in from Manchester just as they were going to dinner, tired, and in an ill humour; for he had bad news. Old Scott would neither dissolve nor buy.

"He pursed up his ugly mouth," said Jack, "and said it was a 'very extraordinary proposition—very extraordinary'—like an old poll parrot! They've got an absurd story down there that you're to be made a peer, and he's as jealous as a cat—confound him!"

Then the day's work (or at least half of it), had to be gone over for the fifth time.

"What I can't make out, dad," said Jack, when the story had been brought down to the conversion of Mr. Alexander, "is how you ever let that fellow into your confidence."

"Consider for a moment, and you will. I thought he was on the right track—that

somehow or other he and Willford had found the right Desmonds. When he first threw out a hint about trusts, I felt sure of it."

"And so," mused Jack, "he has got the iron key! He'll make them pay smartly for that, I'll be bound."

"Why should they pay anything? They don't want it."

"What!—not to open the casket?"

"I hope that they will not open it," said his father.

"Hope first then, that they may suddenly become angels of light: no mortal man and woman could resist such a temptation if they had the chance of gratifying it. But why should they not open it, dad?"

"Because they have come to a very fair and proper arrangement between themselves, which might be deranged if they pried into that old casket. It is good to leave well alone, Jack. If Mr. Alexander were to drop his iron key into the middle of the

Atlantic Ocean, I, for one, should be very well satisfied."

The judge had other uses for that key. He redeemed it from Sir Stephen according to contract, and he sent it with his "compliments" to Mr. D'Esmonde!

This necessitated another family counsel, by which Dennis' warning to leave well alone, and not open the casket, was received with a chorus of groans.

"Have it your own way," he said. "It's your business now—thank God!—not mine; only I warn you there may be disappointment—there may be something in the casket to show how Hugh Desmond wished the lands to be divided."

"All the better if there is," said D'Esmonde.

"You forget that their value has changed since his time. What was a fair division then, would not be a fair division now," replied Dennis. "Remember what Saxon said, 'Hold your tongues, and don't quarrel amongst yourselves, and you are safe.'"

"One would think it was another Pandora's box," Mrs. Tremayne observed with a smiling face. "Are we going to fight over the casket, Mr. D'Esmonde?"

"I think not," he answered her.

"But I," broke in Fanny, "I will do battle to the death with everybody (except Mr. Dennis) who says we are not to open the casket. It's downright *wicked* not to see what's inside, now we have the keys."

So it was settled that they should all run down to Staffordshire by the early train next day; open the casket, have a picnic dinner at the Grange, and return by the mail. "All" included Spencer Saxon and Count Tasti.

The squire's "den" did not present a scene sufficiently imposing for the ceremony of the day. The casket was carried in triumph into the dining-room, and placed upon the table facing the legend of the house; which appeared to stand out clearer than usual.

"Beware!" muttered Fanny in mock

solemnity. “ ‘Beware the hand that holds the iron key!’ That’s mine. Behold and tremble.”

“Now, please attend,” pleaded Dennis, “or you’ll only hamper the locks, and waste the small chance you have of getting it open. It must be unlocked first by Mrs. Tremayne with the Gold Key, then by George D’Esmonde with the Silver Key; then *locked* by you Miss Bright-eyes, with the Iron Key, when a fourth key-hole will appear; into which the Gold Key is to be pressed without turning it, and then the lid ought to rise by itself.”

After some considerable blowing into the gold key-hole, and picking it out with hair pins, the key, well lubricated, was introduced and turned. The silver lock was much more restive. The casket had to be placed on its back and oil poured in the key-hole; but by patience and perseverance the key was worked round, and they all heard the bolt shoot back.

“Now, it’s my turn,” said Fanny coming

forward. The hand which held the Iron Key trembled. "Wh—where do you suppose the other key-hole will appear? Will anything jump up, or—or go off—do you think?"

"Judging by the past," replied George, "it will be time to look out for that in about three quarters of an hour. Go on Fanny, if you want the honour and glory of trying it first."

She put the Iron Key in its lock, shut her eyes, gave it a push and a turn, and lo! round it went without any trouble. But nothing jumped up or went off. The club held by one of the dwarfs had moved slightly, and showed where the other and last key-hole might be. A little more picking and blowing and oiling, sufficed to slip dwarf and all aside, and expose the last remaining lock. By this time the whole of the mechanism had got thoroughly oiled, and the action of one part appeared to ease the rest. Mrs. Tremayne again applied the Gold Key, and then the lid of

the casket rose slowly by itself, until it stood wide open before them.

They all fell back and held their breath, in spite of themselves. No one liked to be the first to touch the contents, and all crowded forward to look at them, as though they were wild animals which might jump out and scratch.

"Now I think I may step in," said Saxon, as soon as his eye caught the parchments, which he grasped and proceeded to unfold, as though they were the most ordinary pieces of sheep-skin. "You will observe," he said, "that they are fastened in two bundles—this marked H, and this M. What is the meaning of H and M? Clearly Hugh and Maria. I was quite right, you perceive. His will was to divide equally."

"Aye, aye, aye!" muttered John Dennis, half sorry, half vexed.

"I'll make a note, and tell you presently what is in the one parcel and what in the other," Saxon continued; "for I suppose I

am more accustomed to deeds than any one here."

So they left him to his work (after having locked the casket for the sake of unlocking it again and seeing the lid rise), and scattered till dinner-time.

"Dreaming?"

"How you startled me!"

"You" is Percy, and "me" is Fanny D'Esmonde, whom he found standing in the broad garden-path which ran round the house, and dreaming—day dreaming. Hence his salutation.

"I suppose there are more ghosts than ever now?"

"You have not forgotten that silly speech? Yes, I suppose there are. This must be the window through which poor Sweetheart was shot; and yonder, away in what is now the rose-garden, is where that dear brave Tom Stevens seized Marco. Oh, how I wish I had lived in those days!"

"I am sorry to hear you say so."

“Why?”

“Because they were bad days, vicious days, days darkened by ignorance, days in which might was right, and justice was bought and sold. Look at our own history!”

“I’m proud of it, Mr. Tremayne.”

“So am I ; and, being so, I don’t think much of an age which wanted to burn a Hugh Desmond for sorcery.”

“Do you know that George is going to drop the apostrophe and final e, and take back the old name? We are going to be Desmonds to the end of time, Mr. Tremayne.”

“I am glad to hear it. We, of the younger branch, will pay him all due respect as the head of the family.”

“Except for the name, you are as much Desmonds as we are—are you not?”

“Certainly. I wonder what relations we are?”

“Twentieth cousins, ten times removed!” she laughed.

"And, what is nearer still, friends, I hope?"

"Oh, yes."

"Well, being cousins and friends, don't you think we might be something less formal than *Mr. Tremayne* and *Miss Desmond*?"

"What, *Desmond* and *Tremayne*, as though we were at school?" she asked, rounding her bright eyes.

"No, not that. Your brother calls me 'Percy,' why shouldn't you?"

"Then you'd call me Fanny?" she deliberates.

"After a little practice, perhaps I might venture to do so," he replies.

They have not moved an inch. They stand in the shadow of the wing, each busy with something that will rue the day. He has got her fan, which she dropped when he "startled" her, and she a cloth-of-gold rose, which she has begun to pick to pieces deliberately.

"Well," she replies, after a little consideration, "I'll ask George."

"No, no," he breaks in, quickly; "you mustn't, indeed!—at least, not yet."

"I always tell George—everything."

"I wish I could mesmerise him, and ask something."

"It wouldn't be worth while."

"Then one of two things must be—I am either a very unhappy man, or——"

"Well, go on."

"Or you do not tell George everything—do you?"

The sweet face is bent down now very close over the rose.

"Let us go in and see the casket again," she murmurs.

"There is a casket" (his voice has sunk, and trembles) "in comparison with which that one we saw to-day is poor and its contents valueless. Could George tell me if I may ever hope to open it?"

"Who has the keys?" she asks, shyly.

"Ah! that is the question! Who has

the keys? Will the only key I can employ move the golden lock? It is uncouth, unpolished, this key of mine; but made of honest metal, Fanny—dear Fanny! look up. The name of my key is Love, and the casket is your heart, my darling. Tell me if it will, if it may in time, open it!"

"It never has been locked—to *you*," she whispered.

The division of Hugh Desmond's titles—indicated by the tying up of the deeds in the casket—turns out to be a pretty fair one, even for these days. If anything, it is in favour of the Tremaynes, as they get the lion's share of Hallowfield; but the owner of two centuries and a half ago never dreamed that "ye messuage and tenement known as ye Old Mill, at Morton of ye King," would be wanted for a railway station, and that an acre of land at that end of the town would become worth ten acres at the Grange. There was nothing to quarrel over, and John Dennis was happy.

Troubles are gregarious, as Sir Stephen Willford discovered. He had not hurt John Dennis ; Alexander had taken him at his word, and made him pay for his services ; and his black eye would not get well. He was to be married in a week, and the delicately-blended shades of green, orange, and pink which decorated the injured optic would not fade away. Well, if the worst came to the worst, he'd have it painted. The worst did come, and was not to be painted over.

On the very eve of the day when his splendid Bessie was to make him the happiest of baronets, that fickle damsel eloped with a duke—a Spanish duke, of noble mien and princely fortune—who subsequently turned out to be a croupier at Monaco.

*“ Nada was ! nada was ! Va caier la bolla ! Zero negro ! ”**

Grace's boy will be Desmond of the

* The croupier's cry—“ No more ! ” (betting) “ no more ! The ball is going to stop ! Black Zero ! ”

Grange (they have gone back to the old spelling); but as long as he lives, John Dennis will be master there. It is probable that the Tremaynes will buy Warnstead House and grounds; for Sir Stephen, soured by Bessie's faithlessness and cut by every one, has taken to drink, and dislikes the place—there are such a lot of snakes about there, he says.

The casket stands where Gerty Bowring said it should be. It stands in the drawing-room, "plain for all folks to see," under a glass case; and the time comes when a Hugh Desmond claps his chubby hands and screams with glee as the funny little man with the club starts a oneside, and the lid rises up "all of its own self" when grandpa turns the iron key.

And thus the Family Trees, rooted in Sin, Sorrow, and Death, grow up side by side, and the Sun of Love and happiness ripens delicious fruit upon their topmost boughs, the which, mingling quivering

leaves in the night breeze, may give out
some sound, which to the ear of Fancy
seems like the old legend—

“ Lette Desmond for Denys goe through
And Denys to Desmond be true
Aoe Denys or Desmond will rue.”

THE END.





